

Jehovah's Witnesses did not protect children from abuse, inquiry finds

Organisation relies on old policies, including a two-witness rule, and has weak internal sanctions that leave perpetrators at large, says royal commission

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Children are not adequately protected from the risk of sexual abuse in the Jehovah's Witnesses, a royal commission into child sexual abuse in Australia has found.

The organisation relies on outdated policies and practices, including a 2,000-year-old two-witness rule, and its weak internal sanctions leave perpetrators at large, the royal commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse has said in a report.

The commission found the Jehovah's Witnesses' general practice was not to report child sex abuse allegations to police or authorities unless required to do so by law, which demonstrated a serious failure to provide for the safety and protection of children in the organisation and the community.

"We do not consider the Jehovah's Witness organisation to be an organisation which responds adequately to child sexual abuse," the commission said in a report released on Monday.

The two-witness rule that applies in all cases of complaints of wrongdoing had not been revised or improved since the organisation was founded in the late 19th century.

"The Jehovah's Witness organisation relies on, and applies inflexibly even in the context of child sexual abuse, a rule which was devised more than 2,000 years ago," the commission said.

"A complainant of child sexual abuse whose allegation has not been corroborated by confession by their abuser or a second 'credible' eyewitness is necessarily disempowered and subjected to ongoing traumatisation."

To place a victim in such a position is unacceptable and wrong, the commission said in calling for the application of the rule to be revised and modified.

The commission said it had no evidence of the Jehovah's Witnesses reporting to police a single one of the 1,006 alleged perpetrators of child sex abuse recorded by the organisation in Australia since 1950.

The commission found the sanctions available within the organisation's internal disciplinary system were weak and left perpetrators of child sexual abuse at large in the organisation and the community.

In deciding what sanctions to impose or precautions to take over a known or suspected perpetrator, the organisation had little regard to the risk that they might reoffend, it added.

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