



Hamilton woman hopes to draw attention to Jehovah's Witness child sex abuse allegations

2 class action lawsuits in Canada have been filed against the organization



Samantha Craggs · Reporter · [CBC News February 27, 2018](#)

"I was getting used to having somebody to talk to," says Edith Knox of the Jehovah's Witness friends she made. Now "it's like I'm dead." Knox says she was disfellowshipped after bringing up how the organization treats sexual abuse allegations. (Samantha Craggs/CBC)

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Twice a week, Edith Knox puts a garbage bag over her large posters and carries them to a Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses in Hamilton. Then she stands outside and makes the attendees uncomfortable.

'I half expected a bolt of lightning to come down and strike me dead.'- *Edith Knox*
Usually, Knox goes to the one on Delaware Avenue. That's the one she attended before last year, when she says she was booted out of the church for questioning how it handles sexual abuse claims.

Knox says two Witnesses abused her as a child. For years, she's been anxious and isolated, unable to even invite friends to her apartment. So she doesn't care if her signs make people uncomfortable.

"I'll walk right along so people driving by can read it," she said. "They need to know."

The Hamilton woman wants to join a potential class action lawsuit filed against the Jehovah's Witness organization. If the lawsuit is certified by an Ontario judge and goes ahead, Knox could get compensation if the class action succeeds and if she proves she was abused.

Toronto lawyer Bryan McPhadden filed the \$66-million Ontario suit in September. There is a [second suit in Quebec](#).



Former Jehovah's Witness Mélanie Poirier on confronting her alleged abuser

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The Ontario suit describes the Jehovah's Witness "two witness" rule. That means two people have to see the abuse before the church will consider the case, the statement of claim says.

'My chest felt like it was sinking.'- *Edith Knox*

Most abuse happens in private, the claim says. So the perpetrator would essentially have to admit what he or she did.

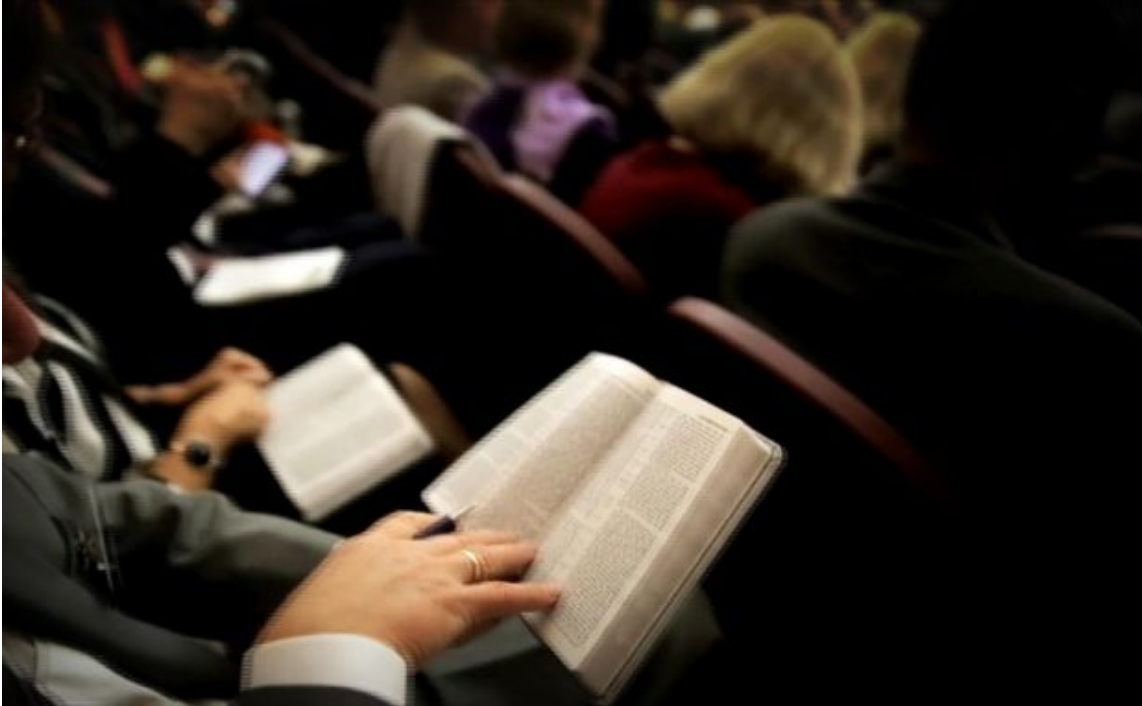
- [Quebec court asked to approve sexual abuse class-action lawsuit against Jehovah's Witnesses](#)

The suit names representative plaintiff Christian Gutierrez of Calgary. It's filed against the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Canada, the governing body for Jehovah's Witnesses in Canada. The society is headquartered at the Bethel branch office in Georgetown, Ont. The suit also names societies in Pennsylvania and New York.

McPhadden sees the lawsuits as "opening the floodgates" to survivors stepping forward. He's still gathering claimants, but "we expect the numbers to be, at minimum, in the hundreds."

The suit has yet to be certified, and none of the claims have been proven in court. No statement of defence has been filed, but the suit is contested.

Knox says a family member who belonged to the church sexually abused her as a child. She also says a church elder abused and frightened her from age six.



Jehovah's Witnesses say their policies for dealing with allegations of child sexual abuse are guided by a strict interpretation of biblical scripture. (Radio-Canada)

He took her out door knocking, she says. He told her he'd date her one day. He touched her hair, her face, her "bottom."

Bringing reproach on Jehovah

"My chest felt like it was sinking," she said, "and I knew something was just bad."

By the time she was a teenager, she says, he was showing up at her house in Minto, N.B. It frightened her so much that she asked another Witness for help.

- [Quebec police probe possible cases of child sexual abuse in Jehovah's Witnesses congregation](#)

"She told me not to talk about it anymore, because it would bring reproach on Jehovah," Knox said. And it would "create divisions" in the congregation.

In 2016, Australia released a [Royal Commission on sexual abuse](#) in the Jehovah's Witness church. The Australian branch [failed to report 1,006 cases](#) of child sexual abuse, the report says. Some went back more than 60 years.

The commission also found that the "two witness" rule blocked 125 allegations from being heard. The church expelled 401 members after internal abuse hearings, the report says, but later welcomed 230 back. Thirty-five came back multiple times.



"I have a hard time trusting," says Edith Knox since her experiences with abuse. (Samantha Craggs/CBC)

Knox couldn't keep quiet after reading this, and started asking questions. Eventually, she was "disfellowshipped" at a tense meeting, she said. Other members promptly shunned her.

She cut hair for a living, she says, and most of her clients were Jehovah's Witnesses. Her sister doesn't speak to her. When she sees former friends on the street, they look away.

'It's like I'm dead'

"I was getting used to having somebody to talk to," she said. Now, "it's like I'm dead."

Kristy Woudstra spent a year [writing an in-depth article](#) on the sex abuse allegations for the *United Church Observer*. She has since become the magazine's managing editor.

- [Jehovah's Witnesses' process for handling child sex abuse allegations keeps authorities in the dark](#)

Knox's desire to be heard, Woudstra said, is not unusual.

"Mostly, they wanted to be heard," she said of the people she interviewed. And "they wanted to use their stories to protect any more children from being hurt."

'Absolutely false'

Jehovah's Witnesses "abhor child abuse, a crime that sadly occurs in all sectors of society," spokesperson Jonathan Ursuliak told CBC News [in an emailed statement](#).

"Any suggestion that Jehovah's Witnesses cover up child abuse is absolutely false."

Congregation elders "comply with child abuse reporting laws," and parents "have the absolute right to report the matter to the government authorities," Ursuliak said.

"Congregation elders do not shield abusers from the authorities, or from the consequences of their actions," and anyone found to commit child abuse "faces expulsion from the congregation."

When there is child abuse, he said, elders also "provide abuse victims and their families with spiritual comfort from the Bible."

No separation

The church also tries to educate members about child abuse through articles on the website, he said, and the church's publications *The Watchtower* and *Awake!*

Additionally, "Jehovah's Witnesses do not separate children from their parents," Ursuliak wrote. "We do not have any programs, such as Sunday schools, youth groups, or daycare centres, in which we take custody of children from their parents. We believe that loving and protective parents are the best deterrent to child abuse. Thus, we continue to educate parents and provide them with valuable tools to help them educate and protect their children."

As for Knox, she's more isolated now. But she also feels relieved.

"That was the weirdest part," she said of being disfellowshipped. "All of the sudden, it felt like such a weight was lifted off of me."

"I half expected a bolt of lightning to come down and strike me dead, but I feel really good right now. I feel better than I have in a long time."

Interview with Kristy Woudstra

We talked to the reporter about her year spent investigating sexual abuse allegations in the Jehovah's Witness organization. Read a brief abridged version of her answers below.

[On mobile? Listen here.](#)

When you were speaking to (survivors), what was their overall mood? What was their emotion in regards to this subject?

Very complex. I think mostly, they wanted to be heard. One of the themes that ran through each of their interviews was they'd been silenced for so long as children and adults, and they were really looking to be believed and heard. Mostly, they wanted to use their stories to protect any more children from being hurt.

What was the response from the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society?

They were very quick to respond by email. I asked for an interview. They preferred that I send them questions, so I didn't really have an option to do an interview. I gave them a deadline and they met it, right to the minute.

They really did feel like they couldn't respond to a lot of my questions around how the organization handles child sex assault cases, how they're responding to the class action suits that have been filed ... just a lot of those questions outlined in my article.

What did they tell you?

They did tell me that they do not protect abusers. It was very carefully worded because it's a very complex organization. That's another thing. The more I got into this, the more I realized how complicated the rules and regulations are, so their response to me was very carefully worded. They deny protecting pedophiles. They say child sexual abuse is the most abhorrent act and that they wouldn't protect abusers.

What did the survivors you interviewed want to see?

Change. They just want change to the process. That's all they want. The one thing the [Australian] Royal Commission revealed is not one in 1,000 cases was reported to the police or to child services. Survivors that I talked to would want all of these cases brought forward to investigating officers for them to be investigated. They would want children to be believed. They would want a much

different process in how these children come forward. They would like to see the abusers dealt with properly and not so many of them walking the halls of their Kingdom Halls.