

Judge authorizes class action for Jehovah's Witnesses sex abuse victims

"The organization of Jehovah's Witnesses is very hierarchical, led by men, and encourages a culture of silence," the judge ruled.

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The iconic Watchtower sign is seen on the roof of 25-30 Columbia Heights, then world headquarters of the Jehovah's Witnesses, in the Brooklyn borough of New York. A Quebec Superior Court judge has authorized a class-action lawsuit for current or former Jehovah's Witnesses in Quebec who were sexually abused by other members as minors. *SETH WENIG / ASSOCIATED PRESS*

Citing a hierarchy that “encourages a culture of silence,” a Quebec Superior Court judge has authorized a class-action lawsuit for current or former Jehovah’s Witnesses in Quebec who were sexually abused by other members as minors.

Authorized last week, the class action argues the church’s internal reporting policies conceal abuse and have silenced hundreds of sexual assault complaints through the years. It seeks at least \$250,000 in damages for each alleged victim.

The lawsuit was filed on behalf of Lisa Blais, a Quebec woman born into a Jehovah’s Witness family. She alleges she was repeatedly sexually abused and assaulted by her brother, 13 years older, beginning when she was only 10 months old.

It’s estimated there are roughly 27,000 Jehovah’s Witnesses in Quebec.

“Given that the lawsuit is based on sexual assaults, a class action is the appropriate measure,” Quebec Superior Court Judge Chantal Corriveau wrote in her 27-page decision. “It would be difficult and impracticable for members to individually come out of the shadows and try to make their claims known.”

The lawsuit targets the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Canada, the parent company of Jehovah's Witnesses in the country, and another society based in Pennsylvania that's responsible for the church's communications and publications.

At the heart of the class action is whether the church failed to protect its members when they tried to denounce sexual abuse.

According to the lawsuit, Blais, now in her 40s, first spoke out about the alleged abuse when she was 16 years old. She sought help from her parents, another Jehovah's Witness and an elder — members who act as spiritual leaders in different congregations — but says she was discouraged from reporting the abuse in order to protect the community.

Blais left her family at 17 and was officially disfellowshipped at 24.

Lawyers arguing against the class action contended Blais's allegations were too vague, that her wounds stem from the incest and her parents failing to protect her from it, and that it isn't the court's place to interfere with religious practices.

But Corriveau found otherwise, ruling Blais's allegations are "based on a set of substantiated facts."

"The organization of Jehovah's Witnesses is very hierarchical, led by men, and encourages a culture of silence," Corriveau wrote. "The internal treatment of complaints of sexual abuse illustrates that."

"It is easy for the Tribunal to conclude that, as a result, victims who have not been encouraged or supported to denounce these assaults also do not have the courage to confront their aggressor and the organization in court by instituting an individual lawsuit."

Reached for comment on the ruling, the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Canada said it's considering its options for appeal.

"The class action was authorized solely on the basis of unproven allegations," a spokesperson wrote in a statement.

"If this matter proceeds to trial the facts will clearly show Jehovah's Witnesses report allegations of abuse to the authorities, in line with the Youth Protection Act," he added. "The well-being of children is of utmost importance to Jehovah's Witnesses."

Blais's lawyer, Sarah Woods, said her client was pleased with the ruling.

Lead plaintiffs in class-action suits involving child abuse often remain anonymous through the proceedings, but Blais chose not to.

According to the class-action application, filed two years ago, Blais wanted to lead the suit "in order to assist other victims" and "to provide access to justice" to other potential class members.

"There is a sense that if victims are willing to be the face of such a recourse," Woods said on Monday, "that hopefully it will encourage other people to come forward and speak out."

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