

Quebec police probe possible cases of child sexual abuse in Jehovah's Witnesses congregation

Investigators seeking other possible victims of two men, Radio-Canada's *Enquête* reports

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Quebec provincial police are investigating allegations of child sexual abuse by two men in a Jehovah's Witnesses congregation in Mont-Laurier in the Laurentians, Radio-Canada's investigative program *Enquête* has learned.

Both men have been sanctioned through the church's internal disciplinary process for allegations of child abuse, but congregation elders did not share their findings with civil authorities.

One of the men being investigated, Michel Courtemanche, who has been expelled from the church, was acquitted of charges of sexual assault and indecent assault in 1996.

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

However, the Sûreté du Québec has renewed its investigation of Courtemanche and another man, former congregation elder Georges Leclerc, based on new evidence from alleged victims.

Leclerc has been stripped of his status as an elder, but he has not been arrested. Courtemanche declined to speak with *Enquête*.

Courtemanche has not been arrested or charged as a result of the new investigation. In an interview with *Enquête*, he pointed to his 1996 acquittal as evidence of his innocence.

According to *Enquête*, Leclerc and Courtemanche were friends around the time of her internal complaint with the congregation about the alleged assaults on their daughter.

Leclerc was, as a congregation elder, a senior member of the congregation who provided religious guidance and ruling on disciplinary matters.

Enquête said Leclerc allegedly did not speak to Herbert to learn the details of her allegations or the Jehovah's Witness protocols in such matters.

Courtemanche was later reprimanded and allowed to remain in the congregation.

Disillusioned with how the Jehovah's Witnesses had handled her complaint, Herbert filed a police report in 1995.

Courtemanche remained a Jehovah's Witness after his acquittal but was expelled from the congregation after two other women filed internal complaints alleging he had assaulted them.

Leclerc remains with the Mont-Laurier congregation, but *Enquête* says he was suspended after at least three women filed complaints internally with the Jehovah's Witnesses, all of them when they were minors.

Police, youth protection not notified of allegations

According to *Enquête*, the first time police investigated Herbert's allegations against Courtemanche in the 1990s, they were not aware Carolle Poudrier's parents had also alleged Courtemanche assaulted their daughter.

Poudrier's parents were members of a congregation in Terrebonne, just north of Mont-Laurier, but the complaint there was not with Courtemanche's congregation in Mont-Laurier.

"In all cases, the victim and her parents have the absolute right to report an alle

When it comes to sharing information with outside authorities, however, the leac
maintaining confidentiality, citing privacy and the ecclesiastical privilege conferr

Enquête found there are as many as 30 steps a Jehovah's Witness must take b
testify in court or furnish civil authorities with church documents, when it comes

"When you study the process, you realize it's really a process for avoiding, a sys
reputation of the Jehovah's Witnesses," said Marilou Lagacé, a former Witness

New instructions regarding allegations of child se

A recent royal commission in Australia found the Jehovah's Witness church ther
child sexual abuse against 1,006 members over a 60-year period. Not one alleg
authorities outside the church.

With pressure mounting in the wake of that royal commission and other allegatic
in its ranks, on Sept. 1, the Watchtower Society issued new instructions regardin
abuse.

Those instructions recognize child sexual abuse as a crime and assert that men
informed that they have the right" to report an allegation of abuse to police.

"The congregation's handling of an accusation of child sexual abuse is not inten
authority's handling of the matter," the Sept. 1 letter reads.

"Therefore, the victim, her parents, or anyone else who reports such an allegatic
clearly informed that they have the right to report the matter to the secular autho