

Jehovah's Witnesses destroyed documents showing child abuse allegations against church elder

Material related to claims against high-ranking member destroyed 'due to passage of time'

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Paedophile Mark Sewell faces jail after being convicted of eight historic sex charges, including rape

The Jehovah's Witnesses destroyed allegations of child abuse and rape against a respected church elder, we can reveal today.

The church claims it disposed of evidence showing claims against paedophile Mark Sewell dating back more than 20 years.

Depraved Sewell, 53, faces a "very substantial" jail term after being found guilty on Friday of eight historic sex charges, including rape, between 1987 and 1995.

Jehovah's Witness leader guilty of rape and seven other indecent assaults

We can also today reveal how:

All but one of the fellow elders who investigated claims against the disgraced businessman, who was once an elder in the Barry congregation, declined to give evidence in his Crown Court trial;

The Jehovah's Witnesses provided nothing to help the police and prosecutors in their investigation, despite "dis-fellowshipping" Sewell 20 years ago;

Claims the church shredded evidence about the allegations flies in the face of their own latest guidance on child abuse; and

The church's own policy on child abuse allegations does not prevent known paedophiles from taking on high-status roles within the organisation.

Who are Jehovah's Witnesses? What do they believe?

In a series of previously unreportable court hearings ahead of Sewell's trial, it was heard how the Jehovah's Witnesses had been unco-operative with detectives investigating the case and said the organisation no longer retained any evidence on abuse claims received in the 1990s.





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In an adjourned plea and case management hearing at Cardiff Crown Court on January 14, prosecutor Caroline Rees told the court: "We have made every inquiry with the church – both the local church and the national church. All the material has been destroyed due to the passage of time."

In the next hearing, on February 4 at Merthyr Tydfil Crown Court, trial prosecutor Sarah Waters said there was an issue over "information from the Jehovah's Witness institution".

She said: "In relation to the Jehovah's Witness material, the officer has had some difficulty getting a response from that institution.

"There's a letter in the notes that says they have not got anything, they have destroyed everything and, in any event, they are not going to disclose anything."

A source close to the case said the church had provided "nothing" to police investigators. It is understood the organisation replied to detectives in letters, at least one of which was unsigned.

The destroyed material related to claims by fellow church-goers that Sewell had attacked them.

The first allegations came from a girl who was only 12 when Sewell began kissing her on the lips, pulling her on top of him and even rubbing her back while wearing nothing but his underpants.

Another worshipper came forward to reveal how Sewell had raped her in an attack which saw her knickers "shredded" as he pinned her down and forced himself on her.

In both cases the victims reported the matters to church elders and were then forced to face Sewell in a "judicial committee" hearing organised by the church.

He rubbished their claims and he was not disciplined.

There were 12 elders and not one of them stood up – not one': Victim of Jehovah's Witness rapist describes torment

At a hearing at Merthyr Tydfil Crown Court before the start of Sewell's 14-day trial, Ms Waters said the authorities had identified "eight or nine" church elders involved in judicial committee hearings but said only one would be giving evidence.

"The rest either do not recall anything or are not willing to assist," she said.

A letter was distributed by the Jehovah's Witnesses global headquarters in New York to "all bodies of elders" on October 1, 2012, updating policy on child abuse allegations within the church. It is understood to be the most recent such document in existence.

The letter – which we have seen – orders the destruction of all previous guidance documents on child abuse and advises any elders made aware of claims to "immediately call the Legal Department for legal advice".

While elders "should investigate every allegation of child sexual abuse" they are "not authorised by the Scriptures to take congregational action unless there is a confession or there are two credible witnesses".

During his summing up, Judge Richard Twomlow touched on the church's two-witness rule and told the jury it meant anything alleged to have happened in private "can never be proved" unless both people involved agree.

"Almost all sexual activity, whether consensual or not, happens in private," he said.

As a result, Sewell's first victim had to "challenge" him at a judicial committee convened by the church, he said.

The judge added: "How effective that can actually be as an actual judicial inquiry may be open to doubt."

Significantly, given the church's claim that no details were retained in respect of historic abuse allegations against Sewell, the letter to elders states: "Information concerning an individual accused of child molestation, proved or otherwise, should be placed in the congregation confidential file and marked 'Do Not Destroy' and kept indefinitely."

It is not known whether this advice was in force at the time of the complaints against Sewell, which first came to light in the early 1990s.

The note – which refers to sexual abusers as having a "weakness" – also states that "the branch office, not the local body of elders, determines whether one who has sexually abused a child is considered a known child molester".

Branch offices – the national headquarters of the organisation in a given country – also determine who is known as a "predator", which is defined in the document as "one who clearly lacks-self-control and by his actions provides reason to believe he will continue to prey on children".

Only if an abuser is deemed to be a "predator" will parents of young children in the same congregation be "warned", the document states.

Those who are known as child abusers may still be able to "qualify for privileges of service in the congregation" – such as becoming elders – according to the letter, which adds: "Considerable time should always pass before one who has sexually abused a child is recommended, if ever."

The letter does not make any explicit reference to contacting the police but instead refers to cases being heard by a "judicial committee".

The church's Child Safeguarding Policy says that looking after youngsters "is of the utmost concern and importance".

It adds: "Jehovah's Witnesses do not condone child abuse under any circumstances or endeavour to shield from the authorities those committing offences of this nature."

In cases where a church elder "learns of a case of child abuse in which a child may still be at risk of significant harm" then, the policy states, "a report to the police or other appropriate authorities will be made immediately".

A church spokesman said: "As Jehovah's Witnesses we have an absolute and unequivocal abhorrence of child abuse and [offer] our support for any victim or parent who reports this crime to the authorities. This is in line with what the Bible says at Romans 12:9.

"We feel that the care and safeguarding of children and the promotion of their welfare is extremely important.

"Jehovah's Witnesses act in harmony with the law and do not condone child abuse in any circumstance or endeavour to shield from the authorities those committing offences of this nature. The spiritual and physical welfare of Jehovah's Witnesses is of paramount concern to the elders who have been appointed to 'shepherd the flock'.

"Individual members of the congregation who seek guidance on personal matters rightly expect that their concerns are treated confidentially. In the shepherding setting the elders offer personal support in a sensitive and caring manner. Therefore, we are unable to comment on the details of any specific case.

"Mark Sewell has not been a member of the Barry Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses for 20 years."

Is this the ultimate revenge? Victim of paedophile e-mails his friends and family to expose him

A vulnerable schoolgirl systematically abused for years by a manipulative paedophile exacted the ultimate revenge when she sent an e-mail detailing the depravity to his friends.

Cynical Mark Sewell had used his high status role as a church elder in the Jehovah's Witnesses to get away with exploiting the youngster.

He would kiss her on the lips, strip down to his white briefs to caress her and pull him on top of her. The abuse later drove the youngster to self-harm.

Despite complaints to the Barry congregation of the church, where Sewell was a respected elder, he was not disciplined at the time.

Last year the victim sent out an e-mail detailing the abuse to his fellow Jehovah's Witnesses as well as friends, family and associates of the paedophile businessman.

She described how his abuse made her feel "sick and horrible".

The woman, now in her 30s, wrote: "I hated the way he felt. He was fat and hairy and had a moustache.

"He was horrible. He was always trying to get me to take my knickers off but I wouldn't.

"Once he forcefully took them off me. I was crying and struggling with him but he was way too strong.

"He got them off me and left the room in a temper as if he was really mad that I had put up a struggle. I was left in a heap on the floor crying."

The campaign of abuse in the late 1980s left her "terrified" but also left her feeling "sorry" for former Butlins holiday camp driver Sewell.

"He seemed to have a power over me but I don't understand how he did it," she wrote.

When Sewell branded the girl a liar after she spoke of the abuse in a meeting with her parents and his wife Mary, she felt "ashamed".

The woman, who cannot be identified for legal reasons, said he managed to convince people she had misunderstood his actions.

"I felt like I was responsible and that I was being silly," she wrote.

"I just felt totally crushed. It was as if he had this power over everyone and no-one could see the real him except for me."

In the heartfelt e-mail, she explained how she slashed at her wrists, arms and face with blades from her dad's razor as she grew up, adding: "I was very confused, angry, and generally disturbed by now."

At 23 she wrote to her abuser. "I explained that I was still suffering every day and that all I had ever wanted was for him to tell the truth and answer for what he had done. I never got a reply."

While she was left with anxiety attacks and night terrors "he seems to be able to do whatever he wants and get away with it", she wrote.

"Mark has never been accountable for what he did to me and for the impact that has had on my life. He's still a Jehovah's Witness and hardly anyone is aware of the things he has done.

"Now I feel I have to do something or at least try to make him answer for actions. I want everyone to know what he has done and what type of man he is.

"I think his friends and family and anyone who knows him deserve to know what he has done.

"I am living with it every day and so are my family."

After the victim circulated the email she was contacted by solicitors working on behalf of Sewell and threatened her with police action for "harassment".

When Sewell gave evidence at his trial he whined that the victim wanted to "ruin" him by sending the e-mail.

On Friday a jury of four men and eight women found him guilty of seven counts of indecent assault and one of rape against a total of four victims.

He was acquitted by the jury of a further count of indecent assault and not guilty verdicts were returned on three further indecent assault charges at the direction of the judge.

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