

# Jehovah's Witnesses face £1m legal bill after young girl was sexually abused by one of its members

By [Merc Reporter](#) | Posted: July 08, 2016



The Jehovah's Witnesses face a million-pound legal bill after a young girl was sexually abused by one of its members.

The victim, now aged in her 20s, was molested by an elder, or "ministerial servant", Peter Stewart, over a five-year period in [Loughborough](#) in the 1980s and '90s, London's High Court heard.

Last year, a judge ordered the organisation to pay £275,000 compensation to the victim or failing to protect her or to warn other parents about Stewart.

The church appealed the decision.

But this week an Appeal Court judge rejected the appeal and said the church should pay Stewart's victim £275,000 compensation and the massive legal costs of the case, which have been estimated at around £1 million.

Stewart, who carried out bible study sessions and door-to-door evangelical rounds, molested the girl, who can not be named for legal reasons, on a weekly basis.

The trauma she suffered derailed her education and career, and led to harrowing nightmares and recurring thoughts of suicide.

Matters came to a head when she "passed out on her bed next to a pile of paracetamol" while on holiday with her husband, "having left him a suicide note".

The woman told her mother what he had done to her in 2000 when she learned he was about to be released from prison.

She reported the abuse to police but Stewart died in 2001, aged 72, before he could be brought to justice.

However, Stewart had been convicted in 1995 of sexually abusing a schoolgirl and a young boy who was also part of the Jehovah's Witness congregation.

The church denied that it could be held responsible for the behaviour of "ministerial servant", Peter Stewart.

It said he was not an employee, acted as "little more than a tidier-upper" after church gatherings and had no responsibility at all for child welfare, its lawyers argued.

Rejecting the appeal, however, Lord Justice Floyd said it was not just a case of opportunistic sex abuse.

Stewart's relationship with the church was "akin to employment" and his role as a ministerial servant put him in a position of trust.

His official status gave him "ostensible authority to have unaccompanied access to children".

And, had it not been for that, the girl's mother would never have accepted him into her home.

Church elders had also failed to take reasonable steps to protect children in the congregation in 1990, after suspicions were raised that Stewart had abused another girl.

Lord Justice Floyd said it was "fair just and reasonable" to order the church's governing body to pay compensation.