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# Jehovah's Witnesses to compensate woman over sex abuse

19 June 2015 | [UK](#)



Amelia (not her real name) was subjected to prolonged and appalling sexual abuse between the ages of four and nine, as Clive Coleman reports

**A woman who claimed Jehovah's Witness elders failed to protect her from sex abuse carried out by a paedophile has won a £275,000 payout.**

The woman, now in her 20s, alleges she was abused as a child in Loughborough by ministerial servant Peter Stewart.

She had argued at London's High Court that he used his role to abuse her.

A judge ruled the organisation was liable for the abuse because it failed to take "safeguarding steps" after Stewart admitted abusing another child.

Mr Justice Globe said he was "satisfied" the defendants should be "held responsible" for the abuse, which took place between 1989 and 1994.

It is the first civil case in the UK of historical sexual abuse brought against the Christian-based religious movement.

The organisation - which accepted that Stewart, who died before facing justice, sexually abused the claimant - said it was "disappointed" with the decision and would appeal.

The victim said: "The procedures the Jehovah's Witnesses follow for dealing with child sexual abuse are the same as it was when I was abused.

"Even having a ministerial servant sent to prison was not enough of an incentive for them to implement change. This sends a clear message about the importance Jehovah's Witnesses place on child protection."

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## Analysis

**BBC legal affairs correspondent Clive Coleman**

This is the first civil case for damages for historical sexual abuse in the UK brought against the Jehovah's Witness organisation, and is thought to be the first brought against any non-mainstream religion.

It illustrates how the law has expanded in recent years so that a person need not be employed by a religious body for it to be vicariously liable - ie responsible - for their actions.

The court firstly asks whether the relationship is "akin to employment".

It doesn't have to be an actual employment relationship (for example, priests are not "employed" but the Church can be liable for their actions), but the relationship has to share features which you might see between employer and employee (for example, where a Church exercises control upon what a priest can and cannot do).

Secondly, the court asks whether the abuse was "connected" to that relationship. For example, if someone uses their position of responsibility as a means to abuse children, then vicarious liability is likely to result.

### **Jehovah's Witness movement explained**

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#### **'Couldn't get away'**

The woman, known only as C during the case, says she was abused by Stewart between the ages of four and nine.

At the time he was a trusted ministerial servant, whose role was to assist elders with religious and administrative duties.

Shortly after C's abuse began, Stewart was found to have abused another child in the Jehovah's Witness community.

He was removed as a ministerial servant in 1990 but because he told elders he had repented, he was allowed to continue with many of the activities he had performed in that role.

C alleges he continued to abuse her for another four years.



Victim: "They just don't take child abuse seriously... and I doubt very much anything has changed now"

The abuse took place at a number of locations, including Kingdom Hall, a place of worship used by Jehovah's Witnesses, with Stewart forcing her to keep silent by telling her "she was sinning" and "she would not be saved".

In 1995, Stewart was convicted of separate child sex offences, including rape and indecent assault, and jailed for five years.

He died, aged 72, in 2001, shortly before police arrived at his home to arrest him for sexually abusing C.

The court had heard C had "suffered hugely" as a result of the abuse, which had affected her education, career and relationships.

She had symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and suffered from repeated nightmares. She also attempted suicide.



C's lawyer Kathleen Hallisey urged Jehovah's Witnesses to address the issue of child abuse

C had claimed the trustees of the Loughborough Blackbrook Congregation and of the Loughborough Southwood Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses, the successors of the Loughborough Limehurst Congregation, were vicariously liable for the assaults, and for the actions of the Limehurst elders.

Speaking to the BBC ahead of the verdict, she said the Jehovah's Witness organisation saw child abuse as a "sin that can be dealt with within their organisation - they don't see that they have to look outside themselves in any way".

"All they want to do is pray for you and promise you that God's going to wipe away all your pain. It's just unbelievable," she said.

She said the organisation needed to "admit to themselves that there is a massive problem".

"These [abuse victims] aren't apostates, these are people who have suffered from horrible, horrible crimes and had their lives completely wrecked," she said.

"They're not out to destroy the organisation. This is a problem that needs to be dealt with."

### 'Wake-up call'

Kathleen Hallisey, lawyer at AO Advocates, said: "This should be a wake-up call to the Jehovah's Witness organisation that they need to implement better child safeguarding policies that are in line with modern day knowledge about child safeguarding and sexual abuse.

"And I also hope that it's a wake-up call to members of the organisation that child sexual abuse is a problem within the organisation - and it's something that they need to do something about."

Richard Cook, solicitor for the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Britain, said: "We are disappointed with the decision, particularly since the court accepted expert evidence that Jehovah's Witnesses in the late 1980s and early 1990s were ahead of their time in addressing the issue of child sexual abuse.

"For decades we have warned congregants and parents of the dangers of child abuse and have published information to help parents safeguard their children. We will continue to do so."

The damages and an interim payment of £455,000 towards C's legal costs will be met by the society's trustees.

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### 'Not serious on child abuse'

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