



Former Jehovah's Witness Accuses Church of Hiding Child Abusers from Congregations

By DAN HARRIS and NICK CAPOTE

A former member of the Jehovah's Witnesses is taking on the leadership of this wealthy, secretive religion, who she says failed to protect her from a predatory pedophile. She blames what she says is the church's policy of silence on child abusers.

Candace Conti, now 28, was just 9 years old when she says she was abused by a well-liked member of her small congregation in Fremont, [California](#), named Jonathan Kendrick. While doing door-to-door evangelizing, which Conti said she would often do without her parents, she said Kendrick would take her to his house and molest her.

“He's just a big person... I found him very scary,” Conti said.

As a child, Conti said she didn't think she could tell anyone about the abuse. But years later, she testified during a trial against the church that Kendrick abused her several times a month for what she says felt like two years.

“I never thought I could [talk about it],” she said. “Bringing that up just would demolish my family-- the only people that I knew... I think I was scared to.”

Conti had nowhere else to turn, she said, because of her beliefs, and she grew up isolated from the outside world.

Like all Jehovah's Witnesses, Conti says she was taught that Armageddon was imminent, and that only the true believers would survive and live in a heaven on Earth. She says she was taught that, “everybody outside of the Jehovah's Witnesses are pretty much walking dead ... and could be used as a tool by Satan to mislead you, to pull you away from your Christian family.”

It was only years later, after Conti had grown up and left the church, that she found Jonathan Kendrick on a sex offender registry. He had served seven months in jail for sexually abusing his wife's 7-year-old granddaughter. After seeing him on the registry, Conti decided to come forward with her case.

She said she “felt really guilty for not doing anything that this wouldn't have happened to somebody else.”

Conti said she went to local church leaders, known as elders, and told them her story. But Conti said the elders refused to believe her unless she could prove the abuse happened by providing two witnesses to the alleged abuse.

According to the religion's internal system of justice, it is believed that the Bible requires there to be two witnesses in order for a [crime](#) to be punishable.

So Conti went to the police instead. They began an investigation, but with Kendrick denying the abuse, the authorities have not brought charges -- although the investigation continues.

Conti's next move was to sue the church itself. She hired attorney Rick Simons, who had spent many years representing victims in cases of abuse by pedophile Catholic priests.

"If ever there was a group that needs the sun to shine on them and their practices, it's this one [Jehovah's Witnesses]," Simons said. "Because when your doorbell rings on Saturday morning and your kid answers the door, you don't want that guy to be a child molester."

When Conti and her attorney began conducting depositions with local church leaders in California, they learned something that astonished them: Even before Conti was abused, the elders knew that Jonathan Kendrick, who had then held a leadership position in the congregation, had also molested his stepdaughter when she was a teenager.

And yet, the elders did not call the police and did not warn the rest of the congregation.

"I was disgusted. I was absolutely disgusted," Conti said. "It was more damage control at that point than ever trying to be proactive and saving somebody."

Under oath, the elders of the congregation said the reason they did not tell the congregation about Kendrick's abuse was that the information was confidential. In fact, the elders said they were following the strict guidelines at the time provided by church leadership at the Jehovah's Witnesses headquarters in New York, called "The Watchtower."

In a series of letters to elders across the country regarding child abuse, The Watchtower stated that although they acknowledge that some states have child abuse reporting laws, allegations should otherwise be kept secret to all but church elders, because the "peace, unity and spiritual well-being of the congregation are at stake" and because "worldly people are quick to resort to lawsuits if they feel their rights have been violated."

The elders in Fremont did remove Kendrick from his leadership position, per Watchtower policy, on the grounds of "uncleanness."

When Candace Conti's lawsuit against the church went to court, attorneys for Jehovah's Witnesses argued that it is not the responsibility of a religious organization to protect children from sexual abuse by other congregation members. They said the church provides education to parents on the risk of sexual abuse. They also pointed out that the alleged abuse of Candace Conti never took place on church property.

Furthermore, church attorneys questioned whether Conti was specifically assigned by the elders to go door-to-door preaching, known as "field service," with Kendrick.

Ultimately, the jury sided with Conti. In a landmark verdict in 2012, she was eventually awarded over \$15 million. The Watchtower is currently appealing the case.

The Watchtower denied our request for an interview, but told "Nightline" in a statement, peppered with Bible citations, that "it would be inappropriate for us to comment on cases currently in

litigation." ... "Jehovah's Witnesses have also consistently warned congregation members and the public of the need to protect their children from the horrific crime of child sexual abuse." **See more of the church's statement at the end of this story.**

Whatever the outcome of her case, Candace Conti's public fight appears to have opened the floodgates. The Jehovah's Witnesses are now facing a series of lawsuits across the country. Attorney Irwin Zalkin is trying 15 of those cases.

"For some reason [church leaders] believe they're above the law," Zalkin said.

In October, a San Diego court awarded one of Zalkin's clients \$13.5 million dollars in damages for alleged sexual abuse suffered at the hands of Congregation leader Gonzalo Campos, of the Linda Vista Spanish Congregation. The Jehovah's Witnesses plan to appeal the verdict.

Kendrick was absent from Conti's trial and denied "Nightline's" repeated requests for an interview. In a brief interview with "Nightline" outside of his home in California, Kendrick said, "My statement is this. I've never been alone with Ms. Conti, never molested Candace Conti."

He denied he ever did field service with Conti alone, and repeatedly denied molesting her or ever being alone with her.

"I'm sure that's the smart thing for him to say," Conti told "Nightline." "That hurts like hell. But ... do you expect honesty from a child molester?"

Conti is moving on with her life. She graduated from college and recently got engaged. But she said she will continue fighting on behalf of all victims of child abuse.

"I don't have a monopoly on pain," she said. "Instead of being victims we can change it, and have our words speak for change. Then this pain might be a little bit worth it."

Since Conti's verdict in 2012, the church appears to have made some changes on its confidentiality policy when it comes to child abuse, but critics, including Conti, say it's not enough.

As for Jonathan Kendrick, he says he is still a member in good standing of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

More of Jehovah's Witnesses Statement to ABC News Regarding This Report:

As you are aware, it would be inappropriate for us to comment on cases currently in litigation. However, in addition to the statement we previously provided, please allow us to make the following points.

We abhor the sexual abuse of children, and we do not protect any perpetrator of such repugnant acts from the consequences of his gross sin and crime. "Romans 12:9.

Our current and long-standing policy is clearly stated in the publication "Shepherd the Flock of God" Peter 5:2, in which elders are provided the following direction:

"Child abuse is a crime. Never suggest to anyone that they should not report an allegation of child abuse to the police or other authorities. If you are asked, make it clear that whether to report the

matter to the authorities or not is a personal decision for each individual to make and that there are no congregation sanctions for either decision. Elders will not criticize anyone who reports such an allegation to the authorities. If the victim wishes to make a report, it is his or her absolute right to do so.????????Shepherd the Flock of God?????1 Peter 5:2, chap. 12, pp. 131-132, par. 19.

Seeking legal advice is a vital element of handling sensitive matters responsibly. Thus, for decades our elders have been instructed to contact our Legal Department whenever they learn of an allegation of child abuse. We do this, not to hide the crime and the sin, but rather to ensure that our elders strictly comply with child-abuse reporting laws.

By means of our Bible-based publications, our religious services, and our website jw.org, Jehovah's Witnesses have also consistently warned congregation members and the public of the need to protect their children from the horrific crime of child sexual abuse. We encourage anyone who wishes to understand our position to visit our website jw.org, and search the term "child abuse."

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