
Jehovah's Witness sexual-abuse-coverup lawsuit settled



The lawsuit filed against a Jehovah's Witness church in York County was settled Monday in a confidential agreement. (Steve Marroni/PennLive)



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PHILADELPHIA - A settlement agreement has been reached, but neither the victim nor the church she said failed to report her sexual abuse to the authorities can talk about it.

On the fifth day of trial Monday in Philadelphia County Court, Stephanie Fessler, of Lancaster, settled the [suit she filed against the Jehovah's Witness Church in Spring Grove](#).

"The matter with the Jehovah's Witnesses has been resolved," her attorney, Jeffrey Fritz, said Monday.

And that was all he could say due to the confidential settlement agreement, which bars all parties from talking about the case or disclosing the amount of the settlement.

When Fessler was a teenager and a member of the Spring Grove church, she was sexually assaulted repeatedly for two years, starting in 2002 or 2003, by another member of the church, Terry J. Monheim, who was in her late 40s and early 50s during the abuse.

Monheim had pleaded guilty in York County Court in 2012 to charges of indecent assault of a person less than 16 and corruption of minors, court records indicate. She was sentenced on May 22, 2012, to three to 23 months in York County Prison, running concurrently with five years of probation.

But Fessler filed her suit not only against Monheim, but also against the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, the Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Spring Grove Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses.

According to a lawsuit, Fessler's family reported her abuse to the church elders, and had the church elders contacted the authorities as they were legally obligated to do, she would have been spared more sexual assaults from the same woman.

"Her main motivation is exposing that the policies of the Watchtower and the Jehovah's Witnesses are not following mandatory reporting laws in Pennsylvania," Fritz said last week, the day before trial started. "That's what led to this happening to her, and continuing to happen to other victims within the religion, as well."

Fritz, of the Soloff & Zervanos law firm in Philadelphia, successfully represented several victims of former Penn State football coach Jerry Sandusky in claims against Penn State for child sexual abuse.

He wrote in Fessler's lawsuit that that the church encourages its members to bring their problems to the elders rather than the police, and, "even in cases of child molestation, if there are not at least two eye witnesses to abuse and the accused denies the wrong, then no action is taken by the congregation."

It wasn't until 2011 when, as an adult, Fessler went to the Southwestern Regional Police Department and made a report that Monheim was charged.

Did Jehovah's Witness elders fail to report sexual abuse? Trial starts Tuesday

When she was 14 years old, a member of a York County Jehovah's Witness congregation was sexually abused by another member and the church elders failed to report the abuse to the authorities, she says in a lawsuit filed against the church.

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