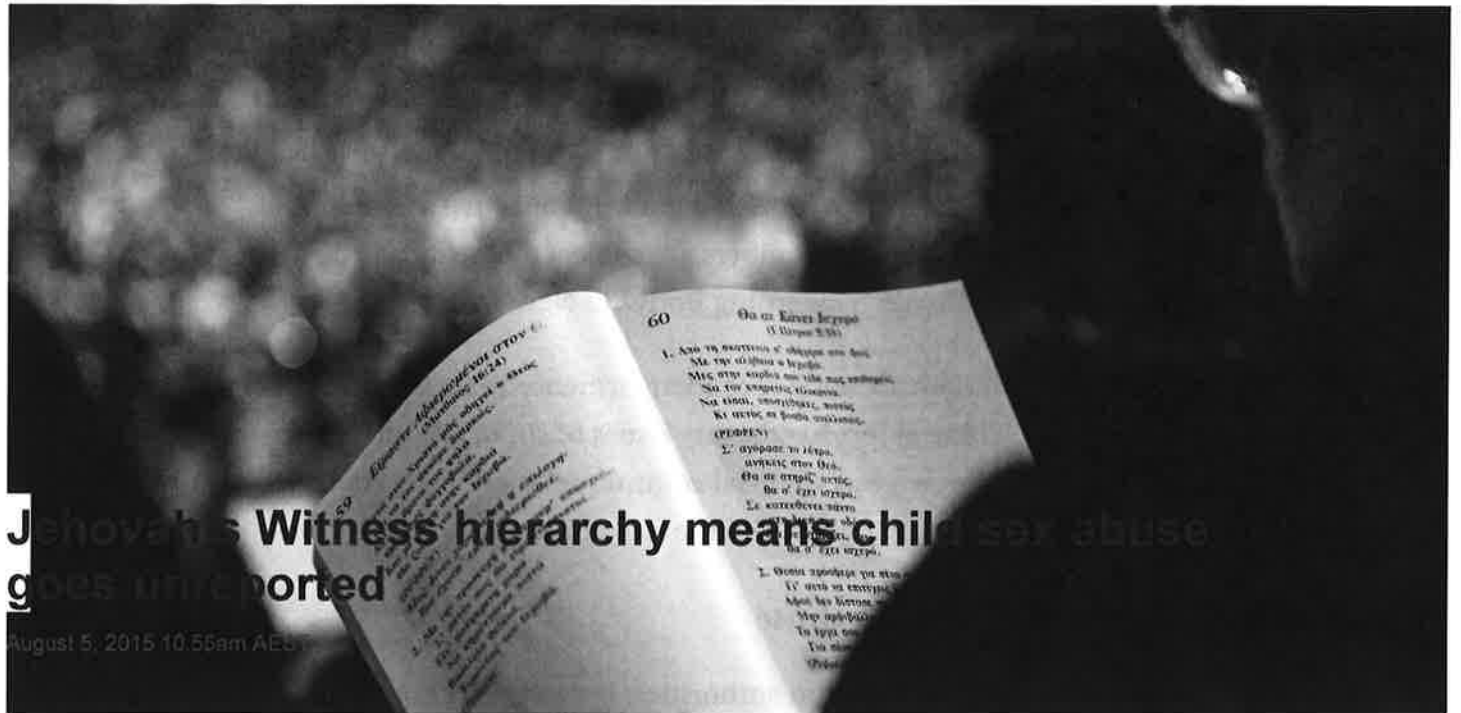


## THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



Jehovah's Witnesses are under the spotlight at the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sex Abuse. AAP/Tracey Nearmy

In 1941, during the second world war, the Menzies government banned Jehovah's Witnesses. This gave them the distinction of being the only Christian religious body to be banned in Australia during the 20th century.

Over the past week, Jehovah's Witnesses have again appeared in news headlines after the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse cross-examined their leaders and scrutinised their policies.

### Who are Jehovah's Witnesses?

Jehovah's Witnesses are mostly known in Australia as suburban door-knockers. They grew out of an American Protestant Bible study group established by Charles Taze Russell in the early 1870s. Some of his adherents had arrived in Australia by 1896.

Russell stressed a particular belief that the end of the world was near, and that Christ would destroy all worldly kingdoms and replace them with a paradise earth.

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Russell believed that this paradise was open to all who would accept the message. Thus, the sect had a moral and spiritual obligation to spread the word to as many people as possible.

As the end of the present system was imminent, Russell advised the Witnesses not to vote, hold public office or serve in the military. Jehovah's Witnesses are therefore known as politically neutral, "separate to the world", and as enthusiastic preachers of God's Kingdom.

Since that time, the organisation has grown to around eight million active members worldwide, including 65,000 in Australia. All members are subject to a strict patriarchal (and insular) hierarchy, led by an all-male "Governing Body" in New York.

Children are subject to parents; women are subject to men; ordinary male members are subject to local bodies of elders. These elders handle any issues of sin or dissent in their congregations. They form what is known as a "judicial committee" (or church court) in cases of serious wrongdoing, like an allegation of child sexual abuse.

### **Why the system fails victims of child abuse**

Jehovah's Witnesses do not report child abuse to authorities. Instead, they convene an in-house judicial committee, which is fraught with difficulty because they rely on a "two-witness rule" (based on the Bible's book of Deuteronomy, 19:15).

This means that two eyewitnesses must be produced for every allegation of child molestation. As royal commission chairman Peter McClellan put it:

*The girl or woman would have to confront ultimately three men in the presence of the abuser and without moral support.*

The elder's handbook – a secret document tendered to the royal commission – notes that if the accused denies any wrongdoing, much thought must be given to questions such as:

*What is the level of his [sic] spirituality? Do all the elders on the body believe that he can be trusted with children?*

As to the victim, questions deemed to be relevant include:

*Is the child or his parents known to be serious, mature? Is his memory consistent, or is it intermittent, or does it involve repressed memories?*

In a worst-case scenario for the accused, he/she would be disfellowshipped (excommunicated), with still no general announcement to the congregation or reporting to the police.

If an abuser is “repentant”, they will be “reproved” – meaning effectively that nothing is made public or reported, but that the elders “keep an eye on” the abuser. In many cases, nothing at all is done.

Ex-Jehovah's Witness activists, including abuse victims, have begun speaking out over the past decade, particularly in Australia. In 2002, Channel Nine's current affair programme Sunday aired an expose of Wollongong's Robert Souter, who had abused boys in the 1980s. One victim recalled:

*My parents approached the church elders and told them what had happened. They were told they shouldn't go to the police but should pray more and leave it to Jehovah.*

The royal commission has shown that nothing has changed since that time in Jehovah's Witness policy. Of the 1006 case files submitted to the commission this year, not one perpetrator was reported to authorities by the church.

In 2012, a survivor of child sexual abuse was awarded US\$23.8 million in punitive and compensatory damages against the legal entity of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, in California. The Jehovah's Witnesses fought this ruling and the damages have been reduced on appeal. But, an increasing number of lawsuits continue to be filed.

The Jehovah's Witnesses organisation needs to re-think its two-witness rule and begin reporting child sexual abuse to the proper, secular authorities.

 Religion Royal Commission into child sex abuse child sexual abuse