Mirror

Jehovah's Witnesses sex abuse scandal: Church accused of cover-up to protect rapists and paedophiles

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Elders accused of 'brainwashing' victims or threatening to have them shunned by their families and friends if they report abuse to the police

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Rapist: Jehovah's Witness elder Markl Sewell has left a trail of victims

Widespread child sex abuse and rape by church members has been covered up by Jehovah's Witnesses, it is claimed.

Elders have been accused of brainwashing abused women and girls into not going to the police so the church can maintain its squeaky-clean image, reveals the Sunday People.

The Christian religion, known for its door-to-door preachers, is said not to have taken enough action against suspected paedophiles in its ranks.

But now two women who were sexually abused are filing papers with the High Court saying the church failed in its duty of protection.

Their lawyer has warned this could be the tip of the iceberg – likening it to the sex scandals which have rocked the Catholic church.

It is claimed there are at least 15 other alleged victims in the UK.

Insiders say talking about their trauma is considered gossip, which is a sin in the eyes of the religion.

Karen Morgan, 38, was just a teenager when she was sexually assaulted by Mark

Sewell, 53 – at the time a Jehovah's Witness elder – who preyed on young women in the congregation in Barry, South Glamorgan.

In July he was found guilty of eight sex offences over eight years, including a rape that left his adult victim pregnant and the sex abuse of a 12-year-old girl. He was jailed for 14 years.

When victims reported him to the church, a committee cleared him of all allegations – and destroyed
the evidence.

But Sewell rejected claims his seniority meant allegations of child abuse had been "swept under the carpet".



Monster: Mark Sewell was jailed for 14 years

Karen told the Sunday People: "Being abused is traumatic enough but being betrayed by the church – the very people you trust in life – is even worse. I felt isolated and alone.

"I grew up believing the church was powerful but it didn't help me.

"My entire world and every thing I had felt about being a Jehovah's Witness was blown apart. The only way I can describe it is utter devastation."

One reason elders are said to take no effective action against suspected paedophiles is the church's "two witness" rule.

Guidelines state elders are not authorised by the Scriptures to take action unless "there is a confession or there are two credible witnesses". In many cases this would mean a second victim must come forward before anything is done.

An official letter from the Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses addressed to All Bodies of Elders in 2012 also states suspected molesters may remain part of the church if they are repentant.

The letter, sent to British elders from head office in New York, also decrees not every child abuser is a predator.

It says: "A predator is one who clearly lacks self-control and by his actions provides reason to believe he will continue to prey on children.

"Not every individual who has sexually abused a child in the past is considered a predator."

Ex Jehovah's Witness Merice Marshall, from East Yorkshire, who works with those abused in the church, says she knows of at least 15 women who claim they were

sexually attacked as children within the denomination's 1,382 UK "kingdom halls" but are reluctant to report their experiences to police.

She said there are at least two more cases due to go to court.

She said: "Every week women tell me how they suffer flashbacks and nightmares. Many have dark thoughts of suicide because they've never dealt with it."

She said saving the church from reproach is drilled into everyone from childhood: "When it comes to reporting a fellow witness to police, you are made to feel you are bringing scandal on the congregation. It doesn't matter that the paedophile has brought shame.

"If the elders consider you have brought shame to Jehovah's door you can be barred from the church and everyone you have ever known, including family and friends, will shun you.

"They will cross the road to avoid you. Your life as you knew it falls apart."



Reign of terror: Mark Sewell in the 90s

For Merice and others helping victims, one of the most troubling aspects is the "two witness" rule.

She said: "By the very nature of abuse, what are the chances of having two witnesses? It means a second young girl or boy possibly has to suffer before the elders even agree to question them.

"Women have told me their attackers were confronted by elders, denied everything then went back into the congregation as if nothing had happened.

"The worst thing is that none of the families within the church find out about the accusations for gossiping is considered an offence which can lead to being disfellowshipped."

Former Jehovah Witness Cora Latham, who runs the UK Advocates for the Awareness of Watchtower Abuses in Cheltenham, Gloucs, said: "We talk to victims all the time and many have been brainwashed into preserving the image of the church or are frightened to go to the police for fear of being shunned by their families.

"Many have been born into the church so the implications of having to leave after reporting crimes is extremely frightening."

She said a Kent woman, now in her 20s, was abused between the ages of 14 and 16 by a senior church figure. But when she told elders, they said she had not suffered abuse and made it feel consensual.

She added: “The church makes the women feel guilty by suggesting they might have worn inappropriate clothing or allowed someone to hold their hand without telling them off.”

She said the woman, who left the church as a teenager, felt dirty after the elders’ meeting and is struggling to go to the police as she has been made to feel the assault is partly her fault.



Abused: Karen Morgan and Tina Guy from Barry, South Wales were victims of Mark Sewell

Cora claimed another victim in her 30s, from Yorkshire, left the church in her mid-teens after being abused aged eight, but still worries that her parents will shun her if she ever goes to the police.

And Cora said a third victim only recently reported her case after being abused for years by a family member.

She said: “Her family say she has shamed Jehovah’s name so don’t speak to her and they are supporting the person who abused her instead. She is devastated.”

The church was the subject of investigations in 2002 after an American ex-member, Bill Bowen, blew the lid on its child protection policies. In the past four years, there have been 21 UK sex attack convictions involving Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Lawyer Kathleen Hallisey, representing Karen and Wendy, said: “I think these cases are very similar to the Catholic church scandal in terms of the secrecy.”

In six of the cases, elders were accused in court of doing nothing, allowing abusers back into the church or allowing criminals to quiz their own victims.

The Jehovah's Witness Church London headquarters said: "We don't approve of, or condone or cover up child abuse.

"It's a breach of our religious principles, a breach of human rights. It's horrible and any victim or parent or somebody who is aware of what is going on has every right to report crime to the authorities and we are supportive of them if they do.

"There is no such pressure (not to report). End of story. You can look at our literature and, if you've been on our website, you will see how much literature we have put out and over how many years, we make it clear that crime is a matter for the secular authorities."

He admitted the church adhered to a two-witness policy and that suspected molesters were welcomed back into the congregation if they were repentant.

Sewell's victims to sue church

TWO of perverted Mark Sewell's sex attack victims are suing the Jehovah's Witness Church in a landmark case which could blow the religion's child protection policies apart.

Lawyers for the women will lodge High Court papers claiming the church failed in its duty to protect them from the elder.

The case could open the floodgates for dozens of UK women to take action against the church.

Jehovah's Witness elder Sewell was jailed for 14 years in July for raping a fellow worshipper and abusing two schoolgirls more than 20 years ago. He also molested an employee.

Victims claim elders at the church knew of Sewell's attacks but did nothing. Three of Sewell's victims have waived their anonymity to tell of his horrendous sexual reign of terror, including Karen Morgan and Wendy who are taking legal action against the church.

Lawyer Kathleen Hallisey, representing Karen and Wendy, said: "I think these cases are interestingly very similar to the Catholic Church scandal in a lot of ways in terms of the secrecy, the keeping things in house. It demonstrates a lack of judgment certainly in the cases I am dealing with."

Brazen Sewell raped Wendy, then 29, on the sofa of his home. She said: "His heavy bulk was almost suffocating. I could hear him grunting. In seconds it was all over." She became pregnant but miscarried within weeks after the attack in April 1990. When Wendy, now 54, told her husband Paul they confronted Sewell.

He made a snivelling apology which they accepted. She said: "Looking back it's weird as we later went on holiday with Mark and his wife Mary, but the church expected you to forgive people."

14

Years in prison Mark Sewell was sentenced to

Sewell, 53, convinced the couple the attack was a one-off – until his 16-year-old niece Karen Morgan babysat for Wendy's kids and revealed she had been abused by him since the age of 12. It was then that Wendy complained to elders at the kingdom hall in Barry, South Glamorgan, in 1991.

The two women, who both live in Barry, were then forced to face their attacker at church judicial committees, chaired by elders. Wendy said: "My husband and I sat in a room with Mark and his wife as the elders heard both sides of the story.

"They asked me all sorts of very personal questions, including how far apart he pushed my legs, then put the allegations to Mark. It was excruciating. I was never told to go to the police and the Church didn't either."

Mum-of-two Karen, 38, said: "I had to sit in front of a man who had touched me and give all the sordid details to three ageing male elders while Mark branded me a liar. I later went to the police but Mark said 'no comment' through the interview and it was his word against mine."

Sewell was disfellow-shipped from the church, not on the grounds of abuse, but for his attitude during judicial committees and admitting being drunk when he raped Wendy.

He moved to the nearby Llantwit kingdom hall where he was shunned for three years before being reinstated in the congregation.

It was there in 1996, he assaulted book keeper Tina Guy, one of his employees at the janitor supply company he co-owned. Tina, now 44, complained to elders after winning an out-of-court industrial tribunal settlement against Sewell after he propositioned her for sex in his Jaguar and rubbed himself against her at work.

Sewell's trial at Merthyr Tydfil Crown Court heard how the church failed to help police with their enquiries.