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Ousted Members Contend Jehovah's Witnesses' Abuse Policy Hides Offenses

By LAURIE GOODSTEIN

William Bowen always considered himself a devout Jehovah's Witness. As a child, he felt it was his duty to go door to door passing out the church's magazine, The Watchtower. Later, as an elder in his Kentucky congregation, he said he saw it as his duty to inform church officials that a fellow elder had abused a child.

But when Mr. Bowen contacted the church's headquarters in Brooklyn, he says, he was rebuffed. Frustrated by the church's inaction and by its confidentiality provisions, which he said prevented him from sharing the information with others, Mr. Bowen resigned as an elder in December 2000. A year later, he started a group to monitor child sexual abuse in the church.

Late last month, Mr. Bowen, 44, was excommunicated from the church. Behind a locked door, with plastic bags taped over the windows to ward off onlookers, he said, three church elders meeting at the church's Kingdom Hall in Draffenville, Ky., found him guilty of "causing divisions."

The punishment was "disfellowshipping" — complete shunning.

In the past three months, four other people have been expelled from the Jehovah's Witnesses after accusing it of covering up the sexual abuse of children by its members. For Mr. Bowen and other critics of church policies on sexual abuse, the expulsions are part of a concerted effort to keep such abuses quiet.

Expelled Witnesses say the church's own policies and culture conspire to conceal abuse. A panel of church elders, all men, meets in secret to decide each case, a procedure which critics say prevents members from knowing there is an abuser in their midst. To prove an accusation, a child must have a witness to the incident, a condition that is usually impossible to meet.

"This is evidence for the world to see how the Jehovah's Witnesses treat abuse survivors and those who try to protect them," said Mr. Bowen. "They silence them with the threat of disfellowshipping."

J. R. Brown, director of the public information office at church headquarters, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, in Brooklyn, said the church had exemplary policies for handling sexual abuse, which were based on biblical standards and had been widely published in church magazines.

"We're not trying to say we handled everybody in the right way and our elders are all-knowing, all perfect," said Mr. Brown, who declined as a matter of policy to comment on individual cases, including Mr. Bowen's. "But we say, if you take what our policy is for keeping our organization clean morally, it far outpaces anybody else's."

While the Roman Catholic Church has been engulfed in its own sexual abuse scandal, the same issue is beginning to plague the Jehovah's Witnesses, a denomination that claims one million members in the United States and six million worldwide.

But the shape of the scandal is far different than in the Catholic church, where most of the people accused of abuse are priests and a vast majority of the victims were boys and young men. In the Jehovah's Witnesses, where congregations are often collections of extended families and church elders are chosen from among the laypeople, some of those accused are elders, but most are congregation members. The victims who have stepped forward are mostly girls and young women, and many accusations involve incest.

The scope of abuse in the Jehovah's Witnesses is a matter of considerable debate. The church has recently been sued by eight plaintiffs in four lawsuits alleging abuse, one filed in July in Minnesota. Mr. Bowen says that his victims support group, "silentlambs," has collected reports from more than 5,000 Witnesses contending that the church mishandled child sexual abuse.

The church keeps a database of members and associates who have been accused or found guilty of child abuse. Mr. Bowen said church sources had told him the database contained the names of more than 23,000 people in the United States, Canada and Europe. The church says the number is "considerably lower," but will not say what it is.

The church has a firm framework for handling sexual abuse cases. Members who suspect abuse are advised to go first to the elders, who are considered spiritual and moral leaders to whom the members are to turn with their personal problems. Mr. Brown said that the church's legal department advised elders to follow the law in states that have mandatory reporting laws, and in cases in which children appear to be in danger.

The elders are the ones required to judge whether someone has committed a sin like child abuse. If the abuser confesses and is forgiven, the only notice given to the congregation is an announcement that the person has been disciplined. No reason is announced.

However, the elders report the person's name to headquarters, where it goes into the database so that abuser is banned from serving in a position of authority.

"If a person can cry a good tune, there are virtually no repercussions and nobody besides the elders ever knows," said Jean Kraus, who said she went to elders in her Queens congregation years ago accusing her former husband of abusing their daughter. She said that he confessed, was reprimanded and was still an active Witness. "They told me that he wasn't a wicked man, that it was a weakness," she said.

The church spokesman, Mr. Brown, said: "We view such judicial hearings as an extension of our shepherding work as ministers. In other words, we're there to save a person's soul. In these cases we are not going to be vindictive because these are our brothers, and we would hope that they would change."

If the accused denies the allegation, the victim's testimony alone is not sufficient unless there is at least one other witness to the act. The church says its policy is based on a scriptural injunction in Deuteronomy 19:15 that says two or three witnesses are necessary to prove a man has sinned.

Heidi Meyer, a third-generation Jehovah's Witness in Annandale, Minn., said she went to her elders in 1994, when she was 15, to say that from the ages of 10 to 13 she had been repeatedly molested by a fellow Witness eight years her senior, the older brother of a friend. The only eyewitness was her brother, who had once seen the man grab her buttocks as she got out of a car.

The elders asked explicit questions that made her uncomfortable, she said. According to an internal Witness document "Pay Attention to Yourself and to All the Flock," the elders must determine in which category the accusation fits: if it was "uncleanness," a one-time touching above the waist; "loose conduct," touching below the waist or more than once above; or the most severe, "porneia," direct sexual stimulation or activity resulting in orgasm. Each offense carries different penalties, with the most severe for porneia.

The man she was accusing insisted that Ms. Meyer had misinterpreted what happened. The elders agreed.

"I was expecting spiritual guidance," Ms. Meyer said. "I was expecting them to genuinely, sincerely attempt to find justice and protect the rest of the congregation from this same thing happening. And none of that happened."

She, like several other alleged victims and their relatives, said in interviews that the elders warned her against reporting the abuse or talking about it with other members.

"They told me if I spoke about it with anybody, I needed to be careful because I could face a judicial committee for gossip or slander," she said. "If they felt I had committed that sin, I would be disfellowshipped."

Ms. Meyer says she learned only years later that Amber Long, another young woman in the congregation, had at age 12 gone to the elders with her parents to report that she had been molested by the same man. Ms. Long, who is now 23, said she and her parents received a letter from the Witnesses advising her to "leave it in Jehovah's hands."

"They said we shouldn't hold ill feelings about our brothers," Ms. Long said. "Since there weren't two eyewitnesses, they said there wasn't much they could do."

Neither Ms. Long nor Ms. Meyer is still active in the Jehovah's Witnesses. On July 2, the two women filed suit against the man they accuse of molesting them — Derek Lindala, 30, of South Haven, Minn. — the local congregation, and Jehovah's Witness headquarters. Mr. Lindala did not respond to a message left at his home seeking comment.

Barbara Anderson, of Tullahoma, Tenn., said that when she and her husband lived and worked at church headquarters in Brooklyn in the 1990's, she was asked to gather information about child abuse in the congregations. She said she handed over to church leaders dozens of letters complaining about how cases were handled. For her it was a revelation.

"Jehovah's Witnesses like to say that we have one of the most crime-free organizations," Mrs. Anderson said. "But all problems are taken to the elders, and the elders keep them quiet." She said that the documents prompted an internal debate among church leaders, and that when there was no action, she left headquarters disheartened in 1993, after 11 years of volunteering.

Carl A. Raschke, a professor of religious studies at the University of Denver who has written about the Jehovah's Witnesses, said the group was no different from many other insular religions that aspire to theological and moral purity.

"Groups that tend to be very tight-knit and in-grown historically have a higher incidence of sexual abuse and incest," Dr. Raschke said. "That's an ethnological fact. When a religion tries to be thoroughly holy or godly, it's not going to acknowledge that people aren't living up to the ideals of the faith."

On July 25, Mrs. Anderson was excommunicated. A week later her husband, Joe, who had earlier resigned as an elder after 42 years, was also expelled.

"It is inconceivable to think elders would investigate an allegation of murder to determine guilt or innocence, so why would we investigate an allegation of child abuse?" Mr. Anderson wrote in his resignation letter. "This is just not our field of expertise. We are ministers of God, not police."