

Statement on silentlamb's march

September 27, 2002

We respect a person's right to free expression. In fact, as Jehovah's Witnesses, we live by that principle every day of our lives. Our policy for handling child abuse is progressive, and strong, and it protects the congregation.

If an accusation of child molestation is made against a member of a congregation, the elders immediately work to assure the safety of the victim and of other children. Also, they make every effort to comply with the law. This includes complying with laws that mandate reporting the incident to the proper authorities. This is done even when a child is the only one to report the wrong conduct or when the elders received the allegation of molestation in confidence.

On rare occasions a member of a congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses takes up or reverts to the disgusting habit of child molestation. Even if he gives extensive evidence of genuine repentance and has stopped his wrongdoing, the individual is severely censured by the congregation and is not protected from criminal investigation and/or prosecution. Even if today years have passed, he does not qualify for any responsibilities in the congregation. The individual is also directed that he should not be in any unsupervised company of children, including when he engages in any public witnessing. Additionally, elders of Jehovah's Witnesses are alerted to any past behavior of such an individual so as to protect the safety of any children in the congregation with whom he comes into contact. If the person moves to another congregation, the elders in the new congregation are notified; his record goes with him.

However we know that some who are marching here today have been victims of abuse and their heartbreaking stories deeply sadden us. We view child molestation as a disgusting, abnormal and criminal practice. The congregation works to extend spiritual and practical support to victims of child abuse and focuses on their welfare.

Yet the congregation primarily addresses the spiritual side of the issue. We leave the criminal and civil aspects in the hands of the courts. In fact, for years now our published policy has been to tell people they have the right to report.

For example, the October 8, 1993, *Awake!* provided the reminder: "Some legal experts advise reporting the abuse to the authorities as soon as possible. In some lands the legal system may require this," Also the policy document "Jehovah's Witnesses and Child Protection," which was posted on the authorized Web site as well as being distributed to researchers, explains "The elders may be required by law to report even uncorroborated or unsubstantiated allegations to the authorities. If so, we expect the elders to comply. Additionally, the victim may wish to report the matter to the authorities, and it is his or her absolute right to do so."

Earlier this year, among other details provided in the letter read to all congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses in the United States was this paragraph:

"We have long instructed elders to report allegations of child abuse to the authorities where required by law to do so, even where there is only one witness. (Romans 13:1) In any case, the elders know that if the victim wishes to make a report, it is his or her absolute right to do so.--Galatians 6:5,"

Thus Jehovah's Witnesses believe that it is the absolute right of the victim, his or her family, or any other concerned individuals to report the matter to the authorities. There are no congregation sanctions against anyone who reports an allegation of child abuse to the authorities. Our policy does not, however, dictate all of the specifics of the reporting. There are too many variables to stipulate anything beyond compliance with secular law.

Jehovah's Witnesses work to protect children and to prevent the problem of child molestation from contaminating the congregation. We uphold Bible principles and comply with secular law. Jehovah's Witnesses are convinced that the most effective defense against such terrible, damaging behavior is to teach and instill the Bible's high moral principles and values in responsive individuals in the communities in which they live and work.