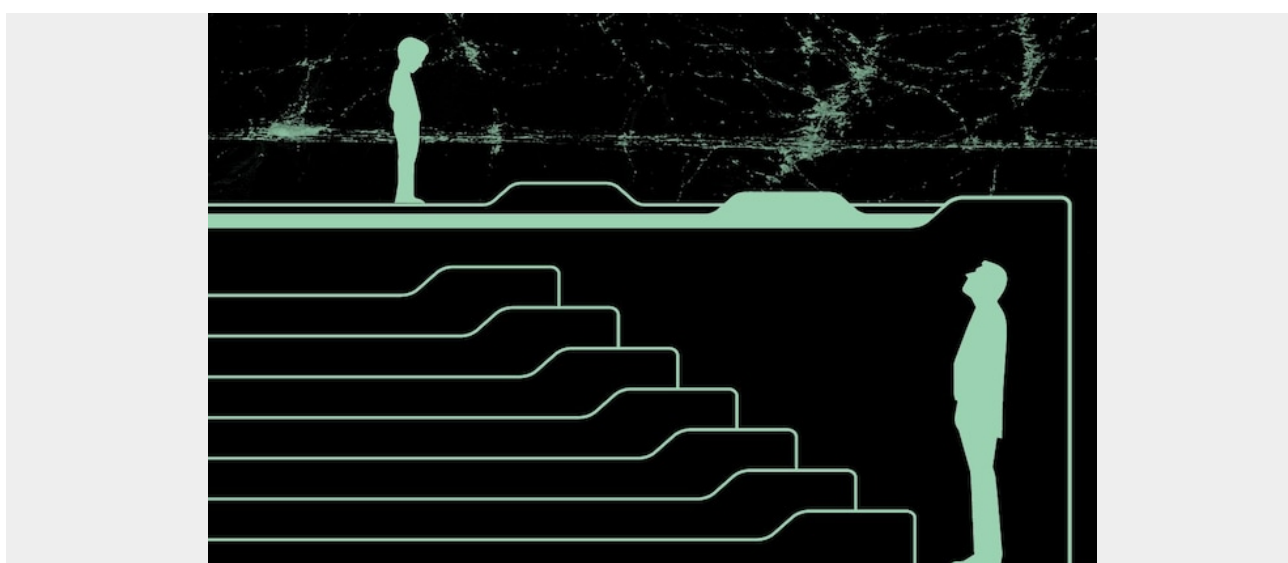


Call Bethel: The inside story of the Telegraph's investigative podcast into child sex abuse in the Jehovah's Witnesses

Missing Pieces: the team widens their investigation

By [Claire Newell](#) ; [Katherine Rushton](#) ; [Sophie Barnes](#) ; [Janet Eastham](#) and [Jack Leather](#)
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Follow the Telegraph's Investigations team on their year-long hunt into the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Like many of the best stories, the idea for our podcast “Call Bethel” came from a tip-off. A source claimed that the Jehovah’s Witnesses had a hidden database of alleged abusers. It was late summer when the email came in and the team set about trying to find it was true.

Over the course of a year, they spoke to victims of abuse, former members of the religion and campaigners to understand an organisation which can be wary of outsiders.

Until the start of the investigation, the team’s knowledge of the religion was very limited: including members not celebrating Christmas or accepting blood transfusions. But over time, by building a network of sources, the reporters started gathering information and evidence.

Documents emerged and whistle-blowers stepped forward to tell the investigations team about cases of abuse and how senior members of the religion had responded. The reporters discovered how, in some cases, elders – the name given to leaders of congregations - [had failed victims](#).

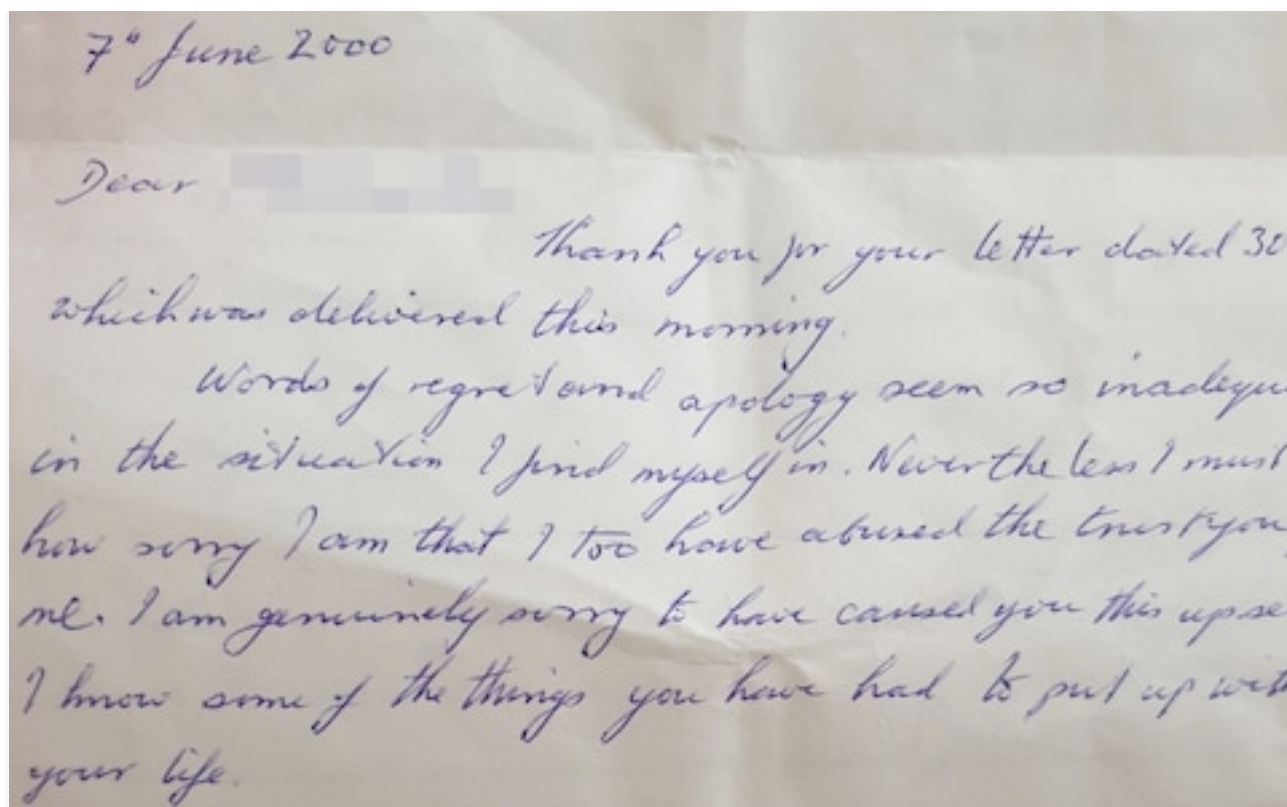
The title of the podcast came from instructions given to elders about what to do if they came across a case of abuse – contact “Bethel” as the headquarters is known to followers. The central office - or "Branch" office - then provides instructions about what to do next.

Episode 1, The Tip-off

In episode 1, [we meet a woman called Daria](#), who tells us how she was sexually abused as a child. Now in her 30s, she describes how she was molested by a man who visited her home to give her and her mother spiritual guidance.

The man, who was around 60 at the time, held a senior role in the Jehovah's Witnesses and was well liked in the congregation. He was respected and admired, but Daria knew his true character - because unbeknown to her family and friends, he was abusing her.

Years later – after he had been convicted of abusing another child - a handwritten letter written in blue ink would drop on the mat of her home. It was an apology by Peter Stewart, the man who had abused Daria from when she was four years old, addressed to her mother.



The letter of apology to Daria's mother

Call Bethel's first episode reveals the contents of that letter and the words which raise questions about whether more could have been done to protect her.

Episode 2, Missing Pieces

It was when she read a news report about a legal judgment that Michelle realised. The Jehovah's Witnesses in Britain had been ordered to pay a substantial sum to a woman they had failed to protect from abuse – a woman we know as Daria. Another child was mentioned, a girl who had also been abused by the same man. As she read the details, Michelle knew she was in fact the other child. She had reported the abuse, but been told she was wrong. She was stunned.

In episode 2, Call Bethel tells the story of how these two women were harmed by the same man – Peter Stewart - and it asks if more could have been done to protect them. We discover that documentation exists which shows that some members of the congregation had known the abuser posed a risk to children.

It is this kind of documentation which is key for another victim. In 2019, Lacie Jones revealed that her stepfather had been abusing her. Clifford Whitely was well respected in the congregation and held a senior position. When confronted by elders, he even confessed part of the abuse, which Lacie thought would be enough. But despite this confession, the route to securing a criminal conviction was not easy. Over the course of several months, Lacie fought to obtain evidence that the police needed, evidence that would lead to her stepfather pleading guilty and being sent to prison.

Episode 3, Paper Trails

It isn't only in Britain that the Jehovah's Witnesses have faced criticism over their handling of child abuse. In episode 3, the investigations team meet the American lawyer who has fought dozens of cases against the organisation - and even secured a US version of the database. Irwin Zalkin describes a cream-coloured filing cabinet in his office, and for a moment, it feels like they might be able to see what's inside. But it's not good news.

Luckily it isn't the only lead. Other people have unearthed crucial paperwork. We meet a woman in Omaha, Nebraska called Holly McGowan who brought a civil claim against Watchtower New York. It was through this process that the contents of reports of abuse kept by Jehovah's Witnesses in the US were revealed. Names, descriptions, action taken when an accusation was made.

More than 8000 miles away, similar paperwork surfaced during a major inquiry in Australia. We hear from one of the lawyers who worked on the country's Royal Commission and discovered more than a thousand different people had been accused of abuse, and 400 of these were alleged to have molested more than one child. The details are deeply disturbing, but for the reporters, they also raise the question of whether similar documents exist in Britain and if they do, what's inside.

Episode 4, The Library

To find out if a database of abuse exists in Britain, the investigations team need to understand how the Jehovah's Witness organisation works. They find two sources in America who can shed light on the system for reporting child abuse there.

The first of these people is a man called Ryan. He has asked us not to use his full name because many of his Jehovah's Witness friends do not know he has "woken up". Ryan is 41 years old and comes from a family that has been Jehovah's Witnesses for generations - his father even served in Bethel.

When he was still part of the religious organisation, he worked on the switchboard of one of its offices in Patterson, New York.

As part of his job, he would transfer calls that came into the branch, including those from elders who had become aware of allegations of child abuse.

He recalls personally receiving about five calls a day from elders needing advice on this topic, which would mean that he and his colleagues would get roughly 20 per day and 5000 a year if the same patterns were followed. Of course, there could have been multiple calls from the same congregation leaders, or could have been about alleged abuse by someone from outside the Jehovah's Witnesses - but the work left a deep impression on him.

This kind of detail is also extremely useful for the reporters because Ryan describes how he would transfer the calls to something called the 'Service' or 'Legal Desk', who would then provide guidance to the elders. But his knowledge stops there.

A former American elder called Kevin Dean is able to fill in the details from the perspective of someone who made calls about child abuse. He said that queries were passed to the service desk, followed by the legal department at Bethel.

Kevin described how the "message" of the Jehovah's Witnesses appealed to him "so much" that he obtained an honourable discharge from the navy to join the organisation. He held the position of elder for more than ten years and as such, when an allegation of abuse was made, he followed the rules and called Bethel so he could be told what to do next. The process made he feel uneasy and he started to question whether the religious organisation's response was adequate. These doubts crystallised when he watched the Australian Royal Commission and saw the testimony of people who had been abused, as well as individuals who were at the top of the organisation. He said that the experience was "mind-numbing and shocking".

Kevin said the process "destroyed" him and became extremely challenging for his marriage as his wife was a dedicated Jehovah's Witness. For him, the process of leaving the organisation was "an isolating experience" because he was shunned by members of his congregation. He describes losing his "community, his identity".

The story of why Kevin left the religious organisation and how friends he had would no longer talk to him appears common for members who say they have now "woken up". But Kevin's tale also provides information to the reporters seeking to understand if and how the religious group collect information about child abuse. Kevin describes hearing the keyboard tap as people on the other end of the phone seemed to be making notes about what he said when he called in. He was also asked to fill out a five page questionnaire, which asked detailed questions about the abuse. This paperwork was returned to the head office in the US. It is this kind of detail which informs the reporters' next steps in Britain as they ask if the system is the same here?

The investigations team spent months trying to track down people in Britain who might have witnessed the same calls or even typed in the information on the other end of the phone when elders called in for advice. A man called Virgil Turner steps forward to provide a cache of documents, including a staff list for the service and legal desks in the UK headquarters, but frustratingly it does not lead to a host of new sources. The reporters find the people they are looking for are either dead, have moved with no forwarding address or are not keen to speak.

PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN

What can we do to protect our children and preserve the cleanness of Jehovah's organization? The primary responsibility for protecting our children rests upon the parents. Fine suggestions for parents can be found in the January 22, 1985, *Awake!* article "Child Molesting—You Can Protect Your Child." Other articles that parents do well to consider are those in the October 8, 1993, *Awake!* entitled "How Can We Protect Our Children" and the December 1, 1996, *Watchtower* entitled "Parents, Find Pleasure in Your Children," specifically pages 13 and 14, paragraphs 18 and 19.

What can the elders do to help protect our children? The elders should be alert to the activity of any who are known to have molested children in the past. Individuals who have manifested a weakness in this regard should be sensitive to their need not to be alone with children. They should refrain from holding children or displaying other forms of affection for them. It would be appropriate for elders to give kindly cautions to any who are doing things that may be a temptation or a cause for concern to others in the congregation. —1 Cor. 10:12, 32.

What should elders do when a former child molester moves to another congregation? As outlined in the February 1991 *Our Kingdom Ministry* "Question Box" and the August 1, 1995, letter to all bodies of elders, our policy is always to send a letter of introduction when a publisher moves to another congregation. *It is imperative that this be done when one who is known to have been a child molester moves.* The secretary should write on behalf of the elders to the new congregation's body of elders and outline this publisher's background and what the elders in the old congregation have been doing to assist him. Any needed cautions should be provided to the new congregation's body of elders. This letter should not be read to or discussed with the congregation. This information should be kept in the congregation's confidential files where it can be reviewed by any elder. The elders should send a copy of this letter to the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society in one of the "Special Blue" envelopes.

PRIVILEGES OF SERVICE IN THE CONGREGATION

In the January 1, 1997, issue of *The Watchtower* the article "Let Us Abhor What Is Wicked" stated on page 29: "For the protection of our children, a man known to have been a child molester *does not qualify for a responsible position in the congregation. Moreover, he cannot be a pioneer or serve in any other special full-time service.*" We have had a number of enquiries asking how this applies in the congregation, and this is being given consideration.

It may be possible that some who were guilty of child molestation were or are now serving as elders, ministerial servants, or regular or special pioneers. Others may have been guilty of child molestation before they were baptized. The bodies of elders should not query individuals. However, the body of elders should discuss this matter and give the Society a report on anyone who is currently serving or who formerly served in a Society-appointed position in your congregation who is known to have been guilty of child molestation in the past.

In your report please answer the following questions: How long ago did he commit the sin? What was his age at the time? What was the age of his victim(s)? Was it a one-time occurrence or a practice? If it was a practice, to what extent? How is he viewed in the

By April they are stuck with no new leads to follow. But it is at this moment that a new source comes forward. A former circuit overseer – which is like a regional manager for the Jehovah’s Witnesses – offers to meet and share paperwork. His experience overseeing congregations is informative. He describes how he has come across cases where it appears that victims or their families have been dissuaded from going to the police. He and his wife are also able to provide documentation showing the religious organisation’s instructions for dealing with allegations of child abuse. The investigations team have seen some of these letters before, but crucially these ones are for elders in Britain. One of the documents is dated 1997 and is a letter to elders informing them that they should make a “report” detailing information about child molestation, including the age of the victim and whether it was a “one-time occurrence or a practice [sic]”.

The letter said that senior members “should be alert to the activity of any who are known to have molested children in the past”.

They are also given a UK version of the questionnaire that Mr Dean had to fill in in America, but this time there’s an outer London phone number at the top alongside a British address.

In total, the Circuit Overseer and his wife have provided dozens of documents. The reporters can see that the instruction to keep records on child abuse, and for these to be sent to headquarters, was repeated multiple times over the years. The investigations team have found instructions for the database in Britain.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses are clear that their current child protection policies instruct elders to make a report to the authorities if they believe a child is in danger. They also highlight that the retention policies were not criticised in a recent inquiry which examined how religious organisations have responded to allegations of child abuse and how they have taken steps to educate and protect congregants.

Episode 5, The Unknown Boy

Episode 5 is the culmination of the investigation, as the reporters try to tie up loose threads. They are also trying to understand what might be in the database, they interview former and current elders to see what records they’ve seen and how some cases have been handled. Some senior members raise questions about the response to allegations of child abuse.

Rob McGregor, a former elder in Hull Derringham congregation, describes how Bethel had instructed him to tell a woman, who had just disclosed being sexually abused as a child, that while she had “every right” to report allegations to the police, the Jehovah’s Witness organisation “would never encourage it”.

Mr McGregor, who called Bethel for advice in 2010-11, told reporters that despite being “fully invested” in the belief system at the time, the advice he was given by headquarters later made him deeply uncomfortable.

He said he was further disturbed when elders at the accused’s congregation told him that despite the perpetrator confessing to the abuse, he had been deemed “repentant” because “the offence had occurred years ago”. The ordeal contributed to Mr McGregor’s decision to leave the Witnesses, and he later reported the abuse allegation to the police.

Another former elder, this time from Ireland, recalls what happened in his congregation when an allegation of abuse was made by a young girl. The individual – whom we have called Patrick to protect his identity – explains that he is still going to meetings in his Kingdom Hall, but that he believes he was “deleted” as an elder after informing about allegations of child abuse. “I’ve got no paperwork to prove it, but I believe it’s a direct consequence of me going to the police”, he said.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses have said that there is no “secret” database and highlighted that one of the senior members spoke about the records the organisation keep when they gave evidence to the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA).

But despite this, questions remain about what is contained inside their files as well as the way in which the organisation has responded to investigations or inquiries about abuse.

It is in this episode that the reporters acquire documentation which offers a potential glimpse of what might be in the database. One is the 2019 disfellowshipping form for Lacie Jones’ abuser, which shows there was a “hearing...to consider a confession of Porneia (Digital penetration) CHILD ABUSE...when Lacie was ~11 years old”. Directions at the bottom of the document instruct elders to send a copy to Bethel.

A second document is a filled in version of something the journalists have come to call the “column document”. It’s a form titled “Child Protection” and has the name of Peter Stewart at the top left. It’s largely redacted, but under the heading “Identity of Victims or Alleged Victims” it appears to have five names of children who were allegedly abused by Stewart. Another column is headed “elders handling the matter”. The journalists decide to approach these individuals, plus others who were in the congregation at the time, to find out what happened. In April, they do their door knocks. It’s not an easy process, but late in the day, one of the reporters is invited into the home of one of the former elders. Sitting in their living room, the elder and his wife recall Stewart arriving in their congregation, how he “was such a gentleman”. They remember how the police were called when one of them spotted Stewart’s milk had not been taken inside, how they were worried about his welfare. This was how they discovered he had been arrested for child abuse. The elder – William Hall – recalls visiting Stewart when he was in prison with two other leaders, but when pressed as to why his name appeared on the “column” document, he is unable to explain. He is old and has been unwell, he and his wife explain and can’t remember the details. But during the conversation, he and his wife did remember something significant – at one point it had become “general knowledge” that another boy might be at risk. They said they child used to stay overnight at Stewart’s house, which they found “strange”. It’s a new name to the reporters and prompts them to wonder how many children might have been abused by Stewart?

The comment about Stewart arriving in the congregation raises questions about the man’s past. To try to answer this, they ordered his death certificate. When it arrived, it revealed Stewart had been born in Hammersmith. But a search of the records shows no one was born on the right date with that name in the entire country. The reporters look in archives trying to solve the puzzle, but it was via a source that they were able to fill in the gaps. They discover that Stewart is understood to have been born with a different name – Cecil Broad. He had apparently changed his name as a young man. They obtained the birth certificate for this new name and sure enough, a Cecil Broad was born on the same day as the man they had known as Peter Stewart. It’s impossible to verify the change of identity because deed poll changes are not compulsory, but it feels like the piece of the puzzle as slipped into place.

It is not beyond belief that Stewart had changed his name. When the reporters researched other cases of people who had been convicted of child abuse, they discovered other instances where a man who was convicted of sexually abusing a child had changed his name. One of these people was the man who had abused Nick French. The reporters managed to find this man and ask him about the database, did he know if he was in it? The abuser said he was unaware, but it is still an illuminating interview because Gary Moscrop – as he used to be called – said that he was currently trying to get back into a local congregation.

For the victims of abuse, mandatory reporting is a potential solution to some of the issues raised in the podcast. It could have made a difference in Daria and Michelle's case. Even though teachers have safeguarding obligation, they are not required by law to inform the police if they suspect a child is being abused.

Daria, who now works in social services, thinks that people whose jobs involve protecting children should be trained to understand the Jehovah's Witness world. "Even when I started to disclose, I was saying an awful lot. And constantly coming up against walls of people's understanding". For her and some of the other victims we have featured in this podcast, the way the matter was handled by the Witnesses compounded their trauma.

The Jehovah's Witnesses say that under current child protection policies, if a child is at danger they make a report to the police, even if they are not required to by law.

Glossary of terms:

The Jehovah's Witnesses operate according to a strict hierarchical structure where senior members are responsible for those within their congregation.

Elders: A position held by senior men in the congregation who have religious leadership responsibilities. This might include overseeing religious services, leading Bible study and attending to the spiritual needs of congregants

Circuit Overseer: An elder who has spiritual responsibility for, and provides guidance to, a group of around 20 congregations.

Judicial committee: Group of at least three elders appointed to determine whether a baptised Witness has acted sinfully. Wrongdoers can be reproved by the committee and disfellowshipped if the sin is serious and not sufficiently repentant. The organisation highlights that this is separate to any criminal process.

Disfellowshipping: Disciplinary action taken to expel baptised Witnesses who have been found by a judicial committee to have sinned and not to be sufficiently repentant of their wrongdoing.

Bethel: The central office and administrative hub for the Jehovah's Witnesses within a specific region or jurisdiction, also referred to as a Branch Office.

Waking up: A phrase used by many former Jehovah's Witnesses to describe losing their faith in the organisation's religious teachings and practices.

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