

**Submission
No 27**

**INQUIRY INTO THE RECRUITMENT METHODS AND IMPACTS OF
CULTS AND ORGANISED FRINGE GROUPS**

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The Jehovah's Witnesses, as individuals, are generally kind and sincere people who genuinely believe they are sharing a message of hope. However, the organisation that governs them operates as a rigid system of control that has caused immense suffering. Beneath its peaceful Christian facade lies a structure that enforces destructive policies, including harsh shunning, financial exploitation, and a failure to protect vulnerable members. It is crucial to distinguish between the everyday Jehovah's Witness who knocks on your door and the powerful leadership that dictates their actions—often at great personal and emotional cost.

The Failure to Protect Children

Jehovah's Witnesses have one of the **highest rates of child sexual abuse cases** among religious groups. Survivors have testified to a systematic cover-up, with leaders discouraging victims from reporting abuse.

In my own congregation, there have been at least six victims of child sexual abuse over a span of decades. These cases were mishandled, swept under the rug, and never properly addressed. Victims were not offered proper support, and in many instances, the perpetrator was allowed to remain in the congregation. This lack of accountability for these heinous acts is not just concerning; it is deeply alarming and reveals the disturbing priorities of the organisation. It is evident that the protection of the organisation's reputation takes precedence over the safety and well-being of children.

The governing body of Jehovah's Witnesses, and the elders who enforce their policies, have long been complicit in the systemic cover-up of sexual abuse. The "two-witness rule" is a key policy that allows perpetrators to escape justice within the congregation. According to this rule, allegations of abuse can only be considered valid if there are two witnesses to the incident, which is an almost impossible condition for cases of child sexual abuse. This policy not only silences victims but also allows abusers to continue their predatory behaviour, knowing that the organisation will shield them from legal consequences.

This failure to protect children from sexual abuse has been investigated in multiple countries. The Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, which investigated the Jehovah's Witnesses in 2015, uncovered shocking findings about the organisation's practices. The Commission found that over 1,000 cases of child sexual abuse were reported within the Jehovah's Witness community in Australia alone, but only a small fraction were reported to authorities. The Commission also uncovered that the organisation maintained a secret database of known abusers, which was never shared with law enforcement, effectively allowing predators to remain within the congregation and continue their crimes. These findings are part of a broader pattern seen across multiple countries, where Jehovah's Witnesses fail to report child sexual abuse cases to the authorities, leaving children at risk.

The Jehovah's Witnesses' response to the Royal Commission's findings has been inadequate. Despite being urged to make meaningful changes to their policies, particularly concerning the two-witness rule, the organisation has not made any significant reforms. This continued reluctance to change, despite the overwhelming evidence of harm, is a stark indication of how little the safety

of vulnerable individuals matters to the leadership. Moreover, while the organisation has participated in Australia's National Redress Scheme, offering compensation to victims of institutional abuse, they have not fully embraced the Royal Commission's recommendations regarding the handling of abuse cases or the safeguarding of children. The two-witness rule, which allows abusers to avoid justice within the congregation, remains in place.

In the United States, similar investigations have revealed that the organisation has systematically covered up child abuse cases. A 2016 investigation by the "Los Angeles Times" uncovered that the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, the legal entity of Jehovah's Witnesses, has quietly settled numerous lawsuits involving sexual abuse claims, without ever acknowledging the full extent of the abuse or making public records of the settlements. Furthermore, the organisation's practice of requiring victims to confront their abusers in front of a panel of elders—often without legal counsel—puts additional emotional and psychological strain on survivors and is a clear example of how the institution prioritises its own interests over the safety of children.

At assemblies, talks have been given that attempt to dull the public scrutiny of these cases and distract from the clear evidence of mishandled abuse. One such talk, delivered by [REDACTED], a member of the governing body, suggested that any negative press about the organisation and its child abuse cases was false and unreliable. He essentially urged members to disregard media coverage and trust the governing body instead, framing them as infallible and beyond reproach. This rhetoric is not only misleading but dangerous, as it actively discourages members from critically examining the facts themselves and instead reinforces the idea that the organisation is beyond question—no matter the harm it has caused.

The psychological and emotional harm done to victims is far-reaching. Many survivors of abuse within the Jehovah's Witnesses have reported long-lasting trauma, including depression, anxiety, and feelings of isolation. They often feel unable to speak out, as they fear not only the loss of their community and family but also the threat of disfellowshipping and eternal condemnation.

I implore you to take immediate action and support investigations into the practices of the Jehovah's Witnesses, as they pose a significant risk to the wellbeing of vulnerable individuals, particularly children. I trust you will consider the far-reaching implications of these harmful practices on the broader community and Australian society. Please see notes below on Australian Royal Commission Case 29.

Shunning Policy

One of the most damaging aspects of Jehovah's Witness doctrine is their strict shunning policy. Members who leave or are deemed "unrepentant" are completely cut off from family and friends, leading to **severe emotional distress, depression, and even suicide**. The term "unrepentant" refers to members who are seen as refusing to renounce or even acknowledge what the organisation views as sinful behaviour, even after being counselled by elders.

For Jehovah's Witnesses, being "cut off" means more than just strained relationships—it is a complete social and emotional exile. Family members and close friends will refuse to answer phone calls or messages, ignore them in public, and exclude them from gatherings, even in times of crisis or grief. Those who are labelled as "apostates" or deemed "bad association" are treated with particular hostility, as members are taught that any interaction with them—even a simple

greeting—could endanger their own spiritual standing. This extreme form of social control forces many to remain in the religion out of fear of losing everything and everyone they have ever known.

Countries like Norway and Lithuania have recognised shunning as harmful. Norway **revoked state funding** for Jehovah's Witnesses due to **human rights violations**, while Lithuania labelled shunning coercive and socially harmful.

Financial Exploitation

Jehovah's Witnesses exploit their members financially and through unpaid labour. Despite claiming to be a religious charity, **they provide no tangible charitable services** to their members or the wider community. Instead, they expect and receive substantial donations for Kingdom Hall building projects while refusing to assist members in financial distress. The government accords certain organisations charity status and grants them tax exemptions, assuming that the money saved through these exemptions will be reinvested back into the community. However, in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses, these funds do not benefit the broader community or its members. Instead, the money is funneled into the head office in New York, where the governing body resides, far removed from the needs of ordinary Witnesses.

Members are pressured to contribute money, unpaid labour, and full-time voluntary service, all while the organisation, or more to the point, its leaders, the governing body, amasses extraordinary wealth. Estimates suggest the Jehovah's Witness organisation is worth up to \$60 billion, yet its approximately 9 million members receive no financial assistance, even in times of hardship. Rather than providing meaningful support to struggling members, the organisation continues accumulating vast assets—while simultaneously discouraging members from pursuing higher education or well-paying careers, leading to limited financial opportunities and a focus on loyalty to the organisation over personal or financial growth.

In the 1990s, ownership of local Kingdom Halls—originally built and funded by individual congregations—was transferred by decree to the Watchtower Society, centralising even more financial power within the leadership. Meanwhile, the governing body now resides in a multi-million-dollar, resort-like compound in Warwick, New York, far removed from the daily struggles of ordinary Witnesses.

Behind the scenes, Jehovah's Witnesses have set up asset management companies, ensuring financial security for the governing body while ordinary members struggle.

Control, Indoctrination and Personal Impact

The leaders maintain strict power and control, enforcing rules that, if challenged, result in disciplinary action and counsel and in some cases, immediate shunning. This coercion ensures compliance, as members live in constant fear of losing their families and entire social support system. One of the most troubling aspects of the Jehovah's Witness organisation is the way it conditions its members to view their love for each other. This 'love' is not based on genuine emotional connection or mutual respect but is fundamentally rooted in blind obedience and submission to the governing body—the 11 men who run the organisation from [REDACTED]. These men are imperious and hold absolute authority over the lives of millions of Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide.

This hierarchical system creates a culture where members are encouraged to prioritise loyalty to the governing body over personal relationships or critical thinking. The Witnesses' "love" for one another is conditional on absolute compliance with the doctrines and rules set by the governing body. This dynamic reinforces a toxic, **controlling environment that suppresses independent thought** and fosters emotional dependency on the organisation.

Members are often taught that their salvation depends on their subservience to this central authority, which in turn prevents them from seeing the contradictions and harm within the organisation. The governing body's teachings and interpretations are regarded as directly from God, making any dissent or questioning tantamount to disobedience to God. This leads to the destruction of personal relationships, the isolation of those who leave, and a deep emotional and psychological burden on members who must constantly maintain this façade of 'loving unity' under the umbrella of organisational control.

Jehovah's Witnesses claim to submit to governmental authorities as a religious obligation, following the scripture that urges Christians to respect secular authorities. However, in practice, this submission is conditional and selective. While they comply with laws that align with their beliefs, the organisation teaches that **governments are ultimately under the control of Satan**. This duality becomes particularly evident when the group faces negative media coverage or public scrutiny. Rather than acknowledging any valid criticism, the organisation spins these situations as "persecution," painting the media or government as agents of Satan, attacking them because they are God's chosen people. This narrative is used to foster a sense of victimhood and to **discourage members from critically engaging with external information**. By framing any negative press as a spiritual attack, the organisation reinforces loyalty and **discourages independent thinking**, convincing members that their suffering is a divine test, while conveniently deflecting any responsibility for their controversial practices. This manipulation creates an environment where the truth is distorted, and members are encouraged to trust the leadership over external sources, regardless of the facts.

Educating society about cult-like groups and high-control religious organisations is essential, especially for those who have been involved in them for an extended period. Speaking from personal experience, having spent 33 years within the Jehovah's Witnesses, it's difficult to realise just how deeply one can become indoctrinated. Over time, the teachings and practices become so ingrained that questioning them feels impossible. It's only when you begin to step outside the controlled environment—outside the confines of JW.org—that you can start to see things from a broader perspective. However, this is not easy. The organisation itself actively discourages members from seeking information outside of their official resources, especially anything critical of the teachings or practices. Elders and the governing body encourage a narrow view, making it challenging for members to even consider alternative perspectives. Educating the public on how these groups operate can help individuals recognise the signs of manipulation, control, and isolation, offering them a path to freedom and independent thought.

My family is no longer associating with me because I chose to think for myself. Because I did a "deep dive" into the doctrine and dogma and history of the religion and had raised my concerns with only a couple of friends in my congregation.

The heartbreak and pain of losing one's loved ones over religious control cannot be overstated. No organisation should have the power to manipulate people into abandoning their own family

members for questioning doctrine. Friends whom I have known for over 30 years have now also chosen to distance themselves from me and my family.

What makes this even more devastating is that my family and I have given tens of thousands of dollars in donations over the years, not to mention the love and support we have poured into the organisation. We have dedicated our time and energy to maintaining Kingdom Halls, providing emotional, spiritual, and practical assistance to fellow members, and fully supporting the work we believed in. Yet, simply because we have dared to disagree with the doctrines they teach, we have been cruelly shut off.

To make matters worse, the local elders persistently harassed us late March and April 2024, pressuring us to "meet" with them under the guise of offering help. However, according to the Jehovah's Witness elders' handbook, *Shepherd the Flock of God*, they had no intention of assisting us in any genuine way. Their real purpose was to disfellowship us, as the book explicitly states: "*Apostasy includes action taken against true worship of Jehovah or his established order among his dedicated people. If it is determined that an individual is an apostate, disfellowshipping is necessary.*" (Chapter 12, Paragraph 2). This process would have formally cut us off from everyone we knew and loved.

We refused to meet with them, preventing them from making this a formal decision. Additionally, I made it clear in a written message that if they did not cease their harassment, I would take legal action. Only then did they finally back off, but the emotional toll and damage had already been done.

Although my husband and I have not been officially disfellowshipped (because we didn't allow them to meet with us), word has spread about us questioning the organisation's teachings. As a result, many have begun to shun us through a practice known as soft shunning—where we are not completely cut off but are avoided where possible, with former friends distancing themselves and limiting interaction. What's particularly striking is that our immediate family members and closest friends have treated us the worst, as if we were officially disfellowshipped. This highlights the immense power the organisation's rules and policies have over its members, conditioning them to prioritise obedience to the leadership over genuine love and relationships.

I respectfully request that my identity remains anonymous in relation to this correspondence. I am concerned about the potential consequences that may arise from my involvement in this matter, particularly from the Jehovah's Witnesses organisation. I trust that you will handle this information with the necessary discretion.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please see references that might be of assistance in your investigation below. I would be happy to provide further information or assist in any way necessary.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

1. Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

This inquiry into child abuse cases, including Jehovah's Witnesses, uncovered a shocking pattern of systemic mishandling. Relevant findings include:

- Over 1,000 cases of abuse were never reported to authorities.
- Witness testimony about the "two-witness rule", which prevented victims from being heard. The "two-witness rule" is a principle within Jehovah's Witnesses' internal disciplinary procedures, based on the scriptural reference from *2 Corinthians 13:1*—"Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." This rule requires the testimony of two witnesses to substantiate accusations of serious wrongdoing, such as child sexual abuse, before any disciplinary action is taken within the organisation. If there is no second witness, cases are often dismissed, allowing perpetrators to avoid accountability. Many victims, feeling that they have no recourse within the organisation and facing the fear of being shunned or discredited, are discouraged from reporting these offenses to government authorities. This creates a dangerous environment where abuse goes unreported and unaddressed. It's important to differentiate this from the term "Witness" used in the context of religious testimony, as the "two-witness rule" is an internal mechanism for disciplinary action within the Jehovah's Witnesses organisation, not related to general legal or social witness testimony

The report from the Commission will have detailed information. You can reference it, and here's the link to the final report:

[Royal Commission Final Report] (<https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/final-report>)

2. Jehovah's Witnesses and Child Sexual Abuse

Investigations into Jehovah's Witnesses' mishandling of abuse claims have been published globally, including in Australia and the UK. You can reference some of these reports:

- [Jehovah's Witnesses and Child Abuse Report] (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-42619690>) (UK)

- [Royal Commission Findings: Case Studies and Reports] (<https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-studies>)

- Submission in response to the consultation paper for the establishing of the "Terms of Reference" for the Child Abuse Royal Commission - "JW Survivors" (https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/491901/globalassets/sections-shared/get-involved/historical-inquiries/betrayal-of-trust/submissions/steven-unthank_supp-b_appendix-1.pdf)

3. European and International Reports on Shunning

Norway and Lithuania have both acted against Jehovah's Witnesses for human rights violations related to shunning. Their actions could be cited as examples of international precedence.

- [Norway's Decision to Withdraw State Funding]
(<https://www.thelocal.no/20170929/norway-stops-funding-jehovahs-witnesses-over-shunning-policies>)

4. Media Reports and Whistleblower Testimonies

- There have been numerous documentaries and news reports on this topic, such as the ABC's "Exposing the Jehovah's Witnesses" and "The Children of Jehovah's Witnesses" documentaries.

- Many former members and whistleblowers have shared their testimonies on websites like JW Facts (an independent website critical of the organization).

Links:

- [JW Facts] (<https://www.jwfacts.com/>)
- [ABC Documentary on Jehovah's Witnesses]
(<https://iview.abc.net.au/show/jehovahs-witnesses-a-dangerous-faith>)

5. Human Rights Violations and International Law

- Shunning, child sexual abuse, and mental health issues related to cultic control can also be linked to human rights violations.

- International law bodies like the United Nations Human Rights Office have examined groups like Jehovah's Witnesses, especially related to discrimination and violations of personal freedom.

- [UN Human Rights Office] (<https://www.ohchr.org/en>)