

## THE AUSTRALIAN

# Jehovah's Witnesses charity denies tax issues with watchdog

By **KIERAN GAIR**, JOURNALIST  
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The charitable arm of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Watchtower Australia, says the organisation has resolved legal action with the charity watchdog after it threatened to revoke its tax-exempt status last November.

Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Australia, which posted an income of \$32m in the year to August 31, had been accused by the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission of "operating outside of Australia".

Watchtower director Terry O'Brien said that the commission informed the organisation last week that it would not be "revoking Watchtower's charity status".

"In fact, they informed us that the matter is closed," Mr O'Brien said on Monday.

A commission spokeswoman said it was unable to comment on the "particular circumstances of a charity" and whether or not a charity had been investigated.

But Mr O'Brien said any suggestion that the commission had revoked the organisation's charitable status was "simply false" and "misleading".

"Last year the ACNC issued a notice to the charity to show cause why it should not be deregistered," he said.

"When the charity responded to the show cause notice we asked for an undertaking that 21-days' notice be given before any adverse decision.

"The ACNC did not accede to the request to provide the 21-days' notice. Therefore, on 8 April we applied to the court to prevent revocation of our charity status."

The commission had informed Watchtower in November of its intention to revoke the organisation's charity status, citing concerns about the organisation's alleged contraventions of the Corporations Act and a failure to comply with governance and conduct standards.

The charity, which had sought judicial review of the decision in the Federal Court, had been accused of "operating outside of Australia" and breaching its requirement to protect vulnerable people when conducting operations overseas.

"Jehovah's Witnesses are not facing tax turmoil," Mr O'Brien said. "The ACNC has never questioned the charity's donation structure. Neither has the ACNC accused the charity of misuse of funds either in Australia or overseas.

"Any suggestion of a misappropriation of funds, or that Jehovah's Witnesses and their legal entities evade their responsibilities, is completely false."

According to an application for judicial review filed on April 8 by Watchtower, the commission's threat to revoke its charity status contained multiple errors of law, including that the legislation confers "no function with respect to child protection" on the commission.

Watchtower said The Australian's suggestion on Sunday that the commission had revoked its charitable status was a "false statement", adding that it should be retracted.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse warned that there were systemic problems within the Jehovah's Witness religion in dealing with abuse, including a failure to report credible allegations to the police. The commission heard the organisation had documentation of abuse allegations by 1800 children involving more than 1000 perpetrators since 1950.

#### **KIERAN GAIR, JOURNALIST**

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