

BEARING WITNESS

Four Corners

13 September 2021

M. STEPHEN LETT, Jehovah's Witnesses Governing Body: So the events unfolding around us, are making clearer than ever, that we're living in the final part of the Last Days, undoubtedly the final part of the final part of the Last Days, shortly before the Last Day of the Last Days.

ADAM HARVEY, Reporter: Eight million Jehovah's Witnesses around the globe believe the End is Nigh for a world that is controlled by Satan. And only they will be saved.

LEONARD MYERS, helper to Governing Body: He may use hailstones of undisclosed size to destroy those wicked humans. Now during that time, will we need to fear the natural elements? Not at all.

RICK ALAN ROSS, Legal expert witness: They are raised in this kind of fear bubble in which they're constantly being told the end of the world is near, Jehovah God is going to murder people who are unbelievers, you are going to be judged.

ADAM HARVEY: But those who've managed to escape the organisation say the real danger is from this group of ultra-conservative Biblical literalists. Former Jehovah's Witnesses have come forward to expose practices they say have destroyed lives.

RENEE PICKLES, Jehovah's Witness 1976-1997: Everybody thinks that Jehovah's Witnesses are just lovely people, friendly, nice looking people, maybe a bit quirky who knock on doors. And it's very difficult to help people understand just how dangerous this group is and what a harrowing experience people who leave have to go through.

THERESA CLARE, Jehovah's Witness 1973-2015: They will rip you apart. They rip your reputation apart. They rip you apart as a person. I mean they even ripped me apart as a mum.

ADAM VAN WIRDUM, Jehovah's Witness 1969-2019: Spending 50 years as a Jehovah's Witness, particularly once you realise that it's not the truth has a devastating effect upon you.

Adam Harvey: A Royal Commission exposed the treatment of victims of child abuse within the Jehovah's Witnesses.

JUSTICE PETER MCCLELLAN, former Chair, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: It is a pretty cruel way of dealing with someone, isn't it, who has suffered sexual abuse?

KEVIN DEAN, Jehovah's Witness 1992-2020: Well, to have 1800 victims over a thousand perpetrators and not a single case be reported to the authorities, to the police, it was shocking. I couldn't believe that.

ADAM HARVEY: In the years since the Royal Commission, little has changed.

KATHLEEN HALLISEY, Senior Solicitor, Bolt Burdon Kemp, UK: And if you refuse to accept there's a problem, then nothing can ever be done about it.

PROTESTOR: Why are you letting this happen to children?

ADAM HARVEY: Now in Australia, those scarred by this group are fighting back.

PROTESTOR: It's worse than the Catholics!

ADAM HARVEY: What has this organisation taken from you?

AMY WHITBY, Jehovah's Witness 1979-2015: Thirty-three years of my life, and I'm not letting them take any more. They're not taking another part of my life.

ADAM HARVEY, Reporter: Tonight on Four Corners, we investigate the secretive world of the Jehovah's Witnesses. We expose the practices that continue to damage a new generation of children. We show how psychological warfare is used against

former members. And we reveal how its bitter fight to protect its reputation and assets retraumatizes those who dare to stand up to it.

TITLE: BEARING WITNESS

ADAM HARVEY: In 2019 Jehovah's Witnesses from around the world came to Melbourne to celebrate their enduring love for God, and each other. A slick three-day program of prayer, song and preaching.

M. STEPHEN LETT, Jehovah's Witnesses Governing Body: Clothe yourselves with love, for it is a perfect bond of union.

GEOFFREY JACKSON, Jehovah's Witnesses Governing Body: Really, what other group of persons on Earth are interested in discussing Love that doesn't Fail?

ADAM HARVEY: But for some former Jehovah's Witnesses, this love has failed them.

ADAM HARVEY: This protest was a defining moment in the life of one former Jehovah's Witness – Renee Pickles.

RENEE PICKLES, Jehovah's Witness 1976-1997: We're set up here as well. Wow they are trying to stop the protest being seen. That is just incredible. What an impact. I'm so proud. I see this and just go that is just fantastic. Just so proud.

RENEE PICKLES, Jehovah's Witness 1976-1997: And those slain by Jehovah in that day will be from one end of the earth clear to the other end of the earth. They will not be mourned, nor will they be gathered up or buried. They will become like manure on the surface of the ground.

ADAM HARVEY: The Jehovah's Witnesses had been Renee's world from birth to her early 20s. The organisation controlled all aspects of her life until it cast her out, severing her from everyone she was close to.

RENEE PICKLES, Jehovah's Witness 1976-1997: Most of the time I was a really happy kid because I honestly believed that I was going to survive Armageddon. We were doing everything right. We were going to inherit the earth and a lot of people would be dying. A lot of people would die and there would be millions of bodies strewn when Armageddon came, but I was pretty confident I was going to make it through. And once those bodies had decayed or we'd buried them, we would take over the earth and get to enjoy all of the spoils.

NARRATOR: John and Jane Hayman have been tramping the streets of suburbia since they were baptised as Witnesses in the mid-60s.

ADAM HARVEY: The Jehovah's Witnesses have long been spreading the word about the impending Apocalypse. Anticipated doomsdays came and went in 1914, 1925 and 1975.

NARRATOR: To some the Jehovah's Witnesses appear as gullible, even comic fundamentalists. To a few they're prophetic and man's last hope of salvation. But regardless of what one thinks of their message, one can't help admire the sheer persistence of John and Jane Hayman as they try to warn Toorak housewives of the end of the world.

ADAM HARVEY: The pandemic has put a stop to doorknocking and temporarily shuttered the organisation's Kingdom Halls, but the Jehovah's Witnesses believe Covid is a sign of impending doom.

M. STEPHEN LETT, Jehovah's Witnesses Governing Body: The spread of this disease is distressing to be sure but we're really not surprised to see the world in the grip of such pestilence are we? Jesus made it clear at Luke 21:11 that pestilence would be part of the sign of the last days.

ADAM HARVEY: The organisation's in-house production studio pumps out slick instructional videos that deliver its unchanged message: the End is coming, for everyone except them.

ADAM HARVEY: Witnesses are told they are being persecuted by 'worldly' institutions.

POLICEMAN: Where are they? Check the basement.

ADAM HARVEY: And are taught to distrust everyone outside the group.

ADAM VAN WIRDUM, Jehovah's Witness 1969-2019: And they're terrified about the idea of what the world is like. They're told that the world is scary place out to get them. They're told the governments are going to eventually soon attack them.

JOHN EKRANN, Helper to the Governing Body: Welcome. This months' program will help us show love and respect in marriage.

ADAM HARVEY: The Jehovah's Witnesses promote the idea of "male headship": women aren't allowed leadership roles.

JOHN EKRANN, Helper to the Governing Body: Jehovah placed the woman under the headship of the man and as such her role is to be in subjection to him.

ADAM HARVEY: Rules are set by a US-based Governing Body of eight men who sit at the pinnacle of the Jehovah's Witnesses organisation, called the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society. All Witnesses are expected to obey their instructions and doctrines, that influence every aspect of life. Jehovah's Witnesses believe these men are anointed as the voice of God on Earth.

RICK ALAN ROSS, Legal expert witness: There is no other means by which Jehovah God, according to Jehovah's Witnesses communicates with the world. So it is through that conduit of the governing body that Jehovah speaks. So whatever they say is to be accepted as the Word of God, and not to be confused with the speaking of an opinion of men. They are absolute leaders with absolute power over the organisation.

IRWIN ZALKIN, Founding Partner, Zalkin Law Firm, USA: The basic premise of their belief system is that the outside world, the world outside of what they call the truth, the belief of the Jehovah's Witnesses, has been corrupted by Satan and is evil. Outside of having to live in the real world, work in the real world, go to school in the real world, they isolate themselves. They see that associating with people, what they call the worldly people, is bad association.

ADAM HARVEY: The Governing Body live at a complex they call Bethel – or the House of God – in New York state. This world headquarters is a 100-acre site that replaced a sprawling Brooklyn campus, sold off in recent years for over a billion dollars. The Governing Body oversees a vast global real estate portfolio, held in regional headquarters and Kingdom Halls built by congregations around the world.

BILL HAHN, Jehovah's Witness 1970-2011: They're a big multi-billion dollar asset business, multi-billion dollar properties, they sold their assets in New York and moved to New York state and built their new headquarters there and they're building other big buildings.

ADAM HARVEY: The Australian branch owns at least 440 properties and last year reported an income of over 32-million dollars. As a religious charity it receives significant tax exemptions.

GARY JOHNS, Australian Charities Commissioner: A charity doesn't have to pay income tax on its earnings. It may also have deductible gift recipient status, which is where the donor gets the tax write-off. There may be other taxes, including state taxes, which are forgiven for charities.

RICK ALAN ROSS, Legal expert witness: I think it's really ironic that an organisation that has predicted that the end of the world is imminent and predicted the end four times, the last time in 1975, would create a long-term investment portfolio with real estate, that they carefully maintained and made a great deal of money on.

BILL HAHN, Jehovah's Witness 1970-2011: Whoever holds back his rod hates his son, but the one who loves him disciplines him diligently.

ADAM HARVEY: Bill Hahn was his congregation's treasurer, known as the Accounts Servant. He was born into the organisation and raised his children as Witnesses.

ADAM HARVEY: What did you miss out on?

BILL HANH, Jehovah's Witness 1970-2011: Uh, soccer. That was my big thing as a, as a kid. I just, I'd ask every year, "Can I play soccer?" And it'd be like, "No. It interrupts it, you know, we gotta go Witnessing, we got, you know, meetings." Birthdays, we never celebrated birthdays. School Christmas activities, never involved. You grew up to feel like you were a foreigner in your own country.

ADAM HARVEY: And yet you did the same thing to your own children?

BILL HANH, Jehovah's Witness 1970-2011: They were probably around 10 and 12 at the time. And we knocked on the door and, it, it was a nice fellow. And he said to the boys, "Oh boys, wouldn't you rather be out playin' soccer in the morning?" And my, my dear middle boy, Oliver just is like, "Oh no that's not, it's all right. We like to meet people and talk to them." And I just, I felt so sorry for him then. Really just came back to me of all that loss that I felt as a child.

ADAM HARVEY: And then there's the fear, recounted by so many former Jehovah's Witnesses.

AMY WHITBY, Jehovah's Witness 1979-2015: What would get me was the little children out in the world as they're called, because they were worldly people. The thought of them dying that used to upset me, because we were taught that only Jehovah's people in the organisation would survive Armageddon, everyone else on the outside would die. So it was our job to go out witnessing, to try and bring as many people in as we could and if you didn't take the opportunity to witness, you had their blood on your hand.

RICK ALAN ROSS, Legal expert witness: In my opinion, the environment of Jehovah's Witnesses can be very damaging for children. Uh, they are raised in, in this kind of fear bubble in which they're constantly being told the end of the world is near, Jehovah God is going to murder people who are unbelievers, you are going to

be judged. And there's this pressure to save people to go and go door to door, to proselytise. And at the same time, no birthdays, no holidays. It's, it's, it's really kind of abysmal.

ADAM HARVEY: Children are taught from a young age that gay relationships are unacceptable.

CARTOON GIRL: Carrie drew two mommies. She says they're married to each other. My teacher says that what matters is that people love each other and that they're happy.

CARTOON MUM: Hmmm. well. People have their own ideas about what is right and wrong. But what matters is how Jehovah feels.

ADAM VAN WIRDUM, Jehovah's Witness 1969-2019: You must not lie down with a male in the same way that you lie down with a woman it is a detestable act.

ADAM HARVEY: Adam van Wirdum left the Jehovah's Witnesses in 2019.

ADAM VAN WIRDUM, Jehovah's Witness 1969-2019: It has a massive effect when forever you were told that you can pray the gay away and you can make a big effort and with, with God's blessing, you can, you can become straight, basically. So certainly from an early age, I knew I was gay, but I just never expressed it. And I was terrified of expressing it. The, the hostility in the congregations for gay people is, is quite extreme.

ADAM HARVEY: Independent thought and analysis is discouraged, as is higher education.

ANTHONY MORRIS III, Jehovah's Witnesses Governing Body: Higher education often instills a sense of superiority and self reliance that is in direct opposition to the Christian personality. We will not need doctors or lawyers after Armageddon, but we will need carpenters and plumbers and similar construction trades.

RENEE PICKLES, Jehovah's Witness 1976-1997: I was given an opportunity in year 12 to go to university. I was one of six kids in the school that was chosen early entry. And I remember when I got home that I showed mum and we laughed and threw it away. Why would we get an education from Satan's system when we had the best education from Jehovah's organisation?

ADAM VAN WIRDUM, Jehovah's Witness 1969-2019: I actually was science dux at school and I got into a Bachelor of Science at Sydney University, but I never did it because I, I was told is a waste of time.

RICK ALAN ROSS, Legal expert witness: In my opinion they discourage people because, in higher education, people are encouraged to critically analyse things, to look at historical facts, objectively, to look at the evidence. And this is seen by Jehovah's Witnesses as threatening, because much of their history and their beliefs, are not predicated on things that are that strong foundationally.

PETER GOUTOS, Jehovah's Witness 1985-2009: No single witness may convict another for any error or any sin that they may commit. On the testimony of two witnesses or on the testimony of three witnesses the matter should be established.

ADAM HARVEY: The moral rules of the Jehovah's Witnesses are strictly enforced by all-male panels called judicial committees. They're set out in a manual called 'Shepherd the Flock of God'.

PETER GOUTOS, Jehovah's Witness 1985-2009: So you could almost say it's the elders' bible. They abide by everything that's written in there, even if some things might be questionable, the elders still have to uphold what's in that guide book.

ADAM HARVEY: Peter Goutos was an elder for 15 years and sat on hundreds of these committees.

PETER GOUTOS, Jehovah's Witness 1985-2009: Most cases would have been fornication, adultery, not many cases about uncleanness, acts of smoking or drinking. For each individual, it's quite humiliating because they had to reveal these personal things that, most embarrassing things and private things that they had to

reveal it in amongst three men. So, quite intimidating and especially for young women to face three men about private issues like that. And these men would interrogate them to really find whether they were truly repentant. So the questions were really, really exhausting and humiliating for the victim.

ADAM HARVEY: What kinds of questions would be asked?

PETER GOUTOS, Jehovah's Witness 1985-2009: Well, like, did you touch their private parts? And how often did you touch their private parts? Were they satisfied in you touching their private parts? These are the kind of questions that each person would be facing. Yeah.

ADAM HARVEY: The experience can be excruciating for those facing these panels, like Renee Pickles.

RENEE PICKLES, Jehovah's Witness 1976-1997: I was subjected to a judicial commission and it was one of the worst experiences of my life. I believe it is the main reason for a lot of my trauma. It was basically three men who were in an interview panel with me. I was not allowed to bring a support person in and I was interviewed, or I would say interrogated over several sittings. And the questions got extremely intimate and personal as to what I'd done so that they could then just use the holy spirit to determine whether I was still worthy and clean enough to remain in the congregation.

ADAM HARVEY: Could you give me an example of the kinds of questions they asked you?

RENEE PICKLES, Jehovah's Witness 1976-1997: Did you kiss? Did you fondle? Did you touch each other in the genitals? Did he have an ejaculation? Did his ejaculation touch your skin?

ADAM HARVEY: Aged just 21, Renee was judged to be 'unrepentant' and issued with a "Notification of Disfellowshipping". She was cast out into a world she was completely unprepared for.

RENEE PICKLES, Jehovah's Witness 1976-1997: I had nobody to turn to, and then I'd lost my entire family and community. So it was like I landed in a different planet and it was an extremely lonely period of time. It was unbelievable.

ADAM HARVEY: Disfellowshipping is accompanied by total social exclusion known as "shunning".

BRANDY SCHMIEDEL, Jehovah's Witness 1979-2018: It's supposed to be loving discipline. Actually, to me, it's inhumane to the point of the complete shunning of not having anybody in your life, talking to anyone, everyone being completely removed from your life that you've ever known, especially when you've been born and raised in an organisation. And all of that is taken away. That is inhumane. It is not loving.

ADAM HARVEY: American Brandy Schmiedel, who lives in Colorado, is the niece of Governing Body member Stephen Lett.

She shunned her brother Steven Camp when he came out as gay.

BRANDY SCHMIEDEL, Jehovah's Witness 1979-2018: I knew his family meant the world to him. It was, it was one of the most important things to Steven. For him to be faced with this decision was probably one of the biggest things he was ever going to have to face.

ADAM HARVEY: After five agonising years, Brandy privately resumed contact with her brother. But the rest of the family continued to shun him. In 2020 he committed suicide, leaving these instructions for his funeral: "Things I don't want: The mention of religion or JW's talked about upon my passing, they were the source of where this all began."

BRANDY SCHMIEDEL, Jehovah's Witness 1979-2018: It was one of the most important things in his life was his family and his friends. And he lost both.

ADAM HARVEY: Soon after Steven's death, his uncle Stephen Lett gave this address about the impending Apocalypse.

M. STEPHEN LETT, Jehovah's Witnesses Governing Body: There'll be many others who will come back who will have to abandon their former way of life. I was thinking as an example a homosexual. Now this former homosexual, comes back in the resurrection and he really thought and he was taught and he came to believe that god accepted him with that lifestyle. But now, he's going to learn about Jehovah's moral standards.

BRANDY SCHMIEDEL, Jehovah's Witness 1979-2018: It was extraordinarily insensitive, especially this is just a few months after my brother had died. It did give me the courage to speak out about this because this needs to end because it is hurting way too many people. I have had hundreds, if not thousands of people reach out to me saying that they have experienced almost the exact same thing that Steven has gone through, or they know someone that has. And the vast majority of them have either attempted, or they know that someone has killed themselves for the same reasons.

ADAM HARVEY: The closed world of the Jehovah's Witnesses was exposed in 2015 by the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

JAMES PENDER, Solicitor, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: It was an astounding process. I mean, we were, perhaps contrary to what the public believed, quite a small team of lawyers. There were three of us, three or four of us, working on this case.

ADAM HARVEY: James Pender was part of the team that uncovered a vast cache of internal files compiled by Jehovah's Witnesses over 60 years.

JAMES PENDER, Solicitor, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: Everything's written down. So the allegations of survivors, what was said, and what was done, is all recorded. And then those records are provided to the branch office in Australia and kept on file.

ADAM HARVEY: The files documented allegations and confessions of the abuse of more than 1800 children by more than 1000 alleged perpetrators.

JAMES PENDER, Solicitor, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: We pored over these 5,000 files, and created a spreadsheet detailing allegations via perpetrator, recording the number of victims, the age of victims, their location, whether the perpetrator was a ministerial elder, or a servant at the time, the positions of people that knew, and all the relevant details. So it was a very forensic process. And I think in retrospect, quite traumatic.

ADAM HARVEY: The Royal Commission found no evidence that the Australian branch office had alerted authorities about any of the abuse documented in its files.

JAMES PENDER, Solicitor, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: It was the scale of what was recorded, the strangeness of what was recorded, that the intimacy of what was recorded, and the fact that none of it had been reported. It was astounding.

KEVIN DEAN, Jehovah's Witness 1992-2020: Well, to have 1800 victims over a thousand perpetrators and not a single case be reported to the authorities, to the police, it was shocking. I couldn't believe that.

KEVIN DEAN, Jehovah's Witness 1992-2020: If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your homes or say a greeting to him. For the one who says a greeting to him is a sharer in his wicked works.

ADAM HARVEY: The scale of abuse staggered Kevin Dean, who was a Jehovah's Witness elder in the U.S.

KEVIN DEAN, Jehovah's Witness 1992-2020: And so when you look at the numbers in Australia of Jehovah's Witnesses, and then you look at the numbers in the United States, we have over a million Witnesses. Well, I knew that the situation is even much worse probably in the United States than it is in Australia.

ADAM HARVEY: When an allegation of wrongdoing is made within the Jehovah's

Witnesses, internal action against the alleged offender is taken by a judicial committee of elders only if there is a confession, or two witnesses.

KATHLEEN HALLISEY, Senior Solicitor, Bolt Burdon Kemp, UK: And so if there isn't a second witness then likely that allegation is not considered to be justified and therefore the sin not to have been committed, and so no, action would be taken by the congregation in relation to that abuse.

LISA FLYNN, Shine Lawyers: And what we know about child sexual abuse is, it doesn't take place in front of people. It's secret. And often only the perpetrator and the victim are present. So that's a very dangerous practise that they won't accept that an allegation has occurred without two witnesses.

ADAM HARVEY: The Jehovah's Witnesses have contested the Royal Commission findings and continue to dispute that the organisation has a problem with its handling of child abuse. It commissioned a 2018 report that argued that the Royal Commission had an "inherent unfairness" and that the Organisation shouldn't be held responsible for abuse that occurs within the families of Witnesses.

IRWIN ZALKIN, Founding Partner, Zalkin Law Firm, USA: The argument that the Jehovah's Witnesses, unlike other religious organisations, have no custodial care of children. So they don't have schools, they don't have, after school programs, they don't have catechisms or those kinds of programs where they take custodial care of children. And so, you can't hold them to the same standards that you would other religious institutions that do have custodial care. That's a lie.

JAMES PENDER, Solicitor, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: The view of the Commission was that because the Jehovah's witness rules and regulations determine how all aspects of a member of the Jehovah's Witness should live in their life, that actually there was no distinction between the life of the family, and the institutional context of the church. And that the institutional context did actually include the families.

ADAM HARVEY: The Royal commission slammed the Jehovah's Witnesses for failing to report child sexual abuse to police. And made three key recommendations: It should involve women in its judicial committees; abandon the

two witness rule in abuse cases; and stop shunning people who leave because of abuse. The Witnesses say they won't implement the recommendations because their practices are based on the Bible.

JAMES PENDER, Solicitor, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: The policies and practices themselves are based on Bible scriptures, they're outdated, and they're just inappropriate for the way in which child sexual abuse tends to occur, and the way in which responses to child sexual abuse should happen.

ADAM HARVEY: Jehovah's Witness elders are bound by the rules set out in their most important guidebook ... "Shepherd the Flock of God". It states that "child sexual abuse is a gross sin". It advises that when an allegation is made, "two Jehovah's Witness elders should immediately call the Legal Department" and await instruction.

PETER GOUTOS, Jehovah's Witness 1985-2009: The book doesn't give any direction about reporting anything to the authorities. It's more so about dealing with the Jehovah's Witness branch legal department. Nothing about the authorities at all.

ADAM HARVEY: In a statement to Four Corners the Jehovah's Witnesses say they will report an allegation of abuse to authorities when required by law or if a child is in danger, regardless of whether there are two witnesses. The organisation has also updated their worldwide child abuse guidelines to say that victims and their parents have the "right to report" child abuse to authorities.

KATHLEEN HALLISEY, Senior Solicitor, Bolt Burdon Kemp, UK: I think the language is important there, it's your right to go and report it to the police, but you're not being told to do that. Certainly if somebody was told by an elder to go and report it to the police the way the organisation works, then they would do that.

KEVIN DEAN, Jehovah's Witness 1992-2020: All you need is a sentence that says, if you hear of child abuse, report it to the police. And I believe that's the best thing that could ever happen for Jehovah's Witnesses and that organisation. Just one sentence, if you hear of child abuse, call the police.

ADAM HARVEY: Until last year, Kevin Dean was an elder in the US. After receiving a report of child abuse in 2019 he referred it to the legal department. He was told to fill in a form that would be used to defend the organisation from litigation.

KEVIN DEAN, Jehovah's Witness 1992-2020: And so as I'm filling this out, I don't understand why I'm doing this and what kind of litigation, what kind of legal trouble would we be in and why would I need a lawyer? And when I read the legal verbiage in it, that's when I realised that this is not about protecting children. They were concerned about protecting the organisation.

ADAM HARVEY: What happened next staggered Kevin Dean.

KEVIN DEAN, Jehovah's Witness 1992-2020: About a couple of weeks after I had these conversations with the legal department, I get a phone call and the brother says, brother Dean, we want you to destroy all your notes written and electronic. And I think they were afraid that there would be some kind of a contradiction between the elders notes and the questionnaire. And so since we'd already filled out the questionnaire they didn't want anything to conflict with that.

ADAM HARVEY: He decided to leave the Jehovah's Witnesses and testify against them in a US investigation.

ADAM HARVEY: Do you think it was about protecting the organisation?

KEVIN DEAN, Jehovah's Witness 1992-2020: Absolutely. I think they were so worried about protecting their assets, the Watchtower, they care about money and they don't want any kind of litigation that will mean that they have to pay out money.

ADAM HARVEY: Two years after the Royal Commission, elders investigating the sins of congregants in Australia were advised against making notes of conversations. If the so-called "wild talk [of a member] is recorded in detail, it may not be accurately assessed when reviewed out of context". And any personal notes "should be destroyed once a summation of the hearing has been prepared".

LISA FLYNN, Shine Lawyers: To knowingly destroy documents that are related to a case involving child sexual abuse, that would be crucial and critical evidence to either a criminal prosecution or a civil case, would be against the law in many of the jurisdictions.

IRWIN ZALKIN, Founding Partner, Zalkin Law Firm, USA: in many of our cases those have been the critical documents. What's kept in a confidential file are forms with minimal information, but in practice, in many congregations, elders would put their notes in those files and their notes would have the details. The notes would tell the real story.

ADAM HARVEY: US lawyer Irwin Zalkin has seven lawsuits in train against the Governing Body for alleged child sexual abuse crimes within the congregation.

IRWIN ZALKIN, Founding Partner, Zalkin Law Firm, USA: We've called this press conference today to announce that we've filed yet another lawsuit against the Jehovah's Witnesses.

ADAM HARVEY: He wants to hold the leaders accountable and have them testify publicly in the US for the first time.

IRWIN ZALKIN, Founding Partner, Zalkin Law Firm, USA: They will do everything to avoid what they call bringing reproach against Jehovah, and that includes keeping everything in house.

ADAM HARVEY: Lawyers who have battled the Jehovah's Witnesses in the US and UK say the organisation has a global problem with both child abuse and the way it responds to victims. Kathleen Hallisey brought the first successful civil case in the UK against the Jehovah's Witnesses: It's called A v Watchtower.

KATHLEEN HALLISEY, Senior Solicitor, Bolt Burdon Kemp, UK: The abuser actually admitted to the abuse, but, it was never reported to the authorities, and, allegedly they took steps to protect other children in the organisation, but obviously that's a difficult thing for them to do, and therefore he went on to abuse A and many

others, and that's not the first case that I've seen like that.

ADAM HARVEY: Overseas, lawyers say the organisation drags cases out until the last possible moment, and then settles to avoid courtroom examination of its practices.

LISA FLYNN, Shine Lawyers: Their attitude to these cases are that they don't want to really look to resolving the claim without protracted legal proceedings. They certainly are taking the position of denying, defending, delaying these claims. There's been difficulties in ensuring that they provide all of the documentation that they need to. And all of those things that continuous denial, the continuous delays certainly has a significant impact on our clients.

ADAM HARVEY: One law firm is representing ten former Jehovah's Witnesses.

LISA FLYNN, Shine Lawyers: There's a number of cases that have been commenced as courageous survivors do come forward and speak out about abuse within this organisation. And these matters are just now getting to court. So I think that it won't be long until there is legal consideration of the duties of the Jehovah's Witness organisation to members of their congregations.

ADAM HARVEY: As an 11-year-old girl growing up in the remote Queensland town of Mt Isa, Amy Whitby says she was sexually abused inside the home her family shared with another Jehovah's Witness family.

AMY WHITBY, Jehovah's Witness 1979-2015: The job of an elder is to shepherd the congregation, to look after the flock, to keep them safe, that's their job because we're Jehovah's people and it's their job to keep us safe and they failed.

ADAM HARVEY: Amy's mother says she complained about the alleged abuse to a Witness elder.

THERESA CLARE, Jehovah's Witness 1973-2015: There was meetings with the elders in my friend's home, but I was never believed. I was told that I was mental. They use my illness against me because I had that breakdown and I suffered manic

depression. And so they used that against me.

ADAM HARVEY: As part of Amy's case, she's claiming that the elders must have known the alleged abuser had been convicted the previous year of offences against an eight-year-old boy.

THERESA CLARE, Jehovah's Witness 1973-2015: So there'd just be no way that those Elders would not have known that he was charged, arrested by the police and charged and then went to court. There's just no way they would've not known about it. It just doesn't happen in that religion. People spy on each other, you're told it's your responsibility. You hear something about someone you are to report it.

ADAM HARVEY: The Jehovah's Witnesses say local Elders weren't aware of the prior conviction, and regardless the organisation isn't responsible for the acts of its members within the family home. Despite Theresa's complaints, the man remained in the congregation and even gave bible readings and talks from the stage.

AMY WHITBY, Jehovah's Witness 1979-2015: It would make me so angry. It would make me so angry to the point that I would get up and I'd go outside and I'd just pace. And I'd just pace and I'd just be going around and around and around and just that anger, because all I wanted to do was run in there and scream at them that he shouldn't be allowed up there. Why is he allowed up there?

ADAM HARVEY: After 30 years of suffering the consequences, Amy is now suing the local Jehovah's Witness congregation and the Australian head office.

LISA FLYNN, Shine Lawyers: Our job is holding them accountable.

AMY WHITBY, Jehovah's Witness 1979-2015: I feel like what happened had a bit of a domino effect on the rest of my life, with things that happened to me after. So yeah. I wonder sometimes what my life would have been like if that hadn't have happened, my self confidence, my self worth.

ADAM HARVEY: After two years of legal wrangling, Amy Whitby's case is now headed to trial. It would be the first time in Australia that the Jehovah's Witnesses

organisation has defended sexual abuse allegations in court.

LISA FLYNN, Shine Lawyers: The courts in overseas jurisdictions have found that they have been found to hold a duty of care to children and they have been found liable for breaching that duty of care. And we think that the Australian courts will make that same determination when they're called on to do so.

ADAM HARVEY: Most major religious groups named by the Royal Commission have apologised and taken steps towards compensating victims of abuse.

LISA FLYNN, Shine Lawyers: We're not seeing any of that in terms of responses from the Jehovah's Witnesses. Since the Royal Commission ourselves we've resolved over 900 cases successfully, and for around \$150 million in compensation. Not one of those cases has been resolved successfully against the Jehovah's Witness organisation.

ADAM HARVEY: The organisation says there is no evidence the Jehovah's Witnesses are guilty of institutional child sexual abuse, and that it responds to compensation claims in a caring, fair and principled manner. But it long resisted joining a redress scheme designed to help victims agreeing to sign up only after it was threatened with the loss of its charity status.

LISA FLYNN, Shine Lawyers: There's a number of benefits that this organisation gets because it is a religious entity, a charitable institution. There's tax benefits. So one way that the government could ensure that this organisation was more child safe, is to remove some of those benefits that it gets from their status. To remove those until they can prove that they are a child safe organisation.

The people who break away from the Jehovah's Witnesses pay a terrible price. They remain cut off from their families and closest friends: those they love the most.

BILL HANH, Jehovah's Witness 1970-2011: Within the ex-Jehovah's Witnesses, we do it once a year, is a memorial day. I did it a few times. You take a bunch of flowers and a card to mourn the loss of your family, and leave it on the door of a Kingdom Hall. It's like a death. And that's where I've come to terms with. Mum died three

weeks ago, and I knew it was coming at some point, and I just got a text message from my brother, to say, "Oh, by the way, mum died yesterday of stomach cancer. Doesn't want a funeral. Didn't want a fuss, and that's it. Jeff."

Bill Hahn also grieves for his three oldest children, who continue to shun him.

BILL HANH, Jehovah's Witness 1970-2011: So really for the last 10 years, from when the reality of it set in, that, "Okay, they view me as dead," that you almost mourn in reverse. I've just had to grieve the fact that until they wake up themselves and leave and come out of the religion, that basically I just have to view them, that they've passed away, which is not nice, but it's a way of coping.

AMY WHITBY, Jehovah's Witness 1979-2015: I knew I would definitely be shunned by friends, but I honestly didn't think my siblings would shun me because of what we'd all been through together.

THERESA CLARE, Jehovah's Witness 1973-2015: One little grandson was with his dad and his dad let him speak to me and he said to, "I'm forgetting you nanny." And he said, "I'm sorry, nanny." And I said to him, "I'll never forget you." I said, "I will always want you to remember that."

