

CHILD ABUSE

Flurry of Lawsuits Allege Cover Up By Jehovah's Witnesses

By DON THOMPSON
POST-RECORD WIRE REPORT

A national flurry of lawsuits, many by the same or affiliated law firms, accuse Jehovah's Witnesses officials of covering up sexual abuse, sometimes by congregation leaders the suits claim used their positions of authority to abuse children.

The most recent series of lawsuits was filed last week in three California counties. The law firms involved are holding public meetings this week in Sacramento, Red Bluff, Clearlake and Napa in a search for more victims and witnesses.

Church general counsel Philip Brumley said the church's own investigation of previous lawsuits found church elders did nothing wrong as they tried to protect the victims, comply with sexual abuse reporting laws, and adhere to Biblical admonitions against accepting accusations by a single witness.

Brumley said 10 lawsuits were filed prior to the California suits. William H. Bowen, who was disfellowshipped — excommunicated — after he set up a critical Web site and hot line for abuse victims, estimated 15 to 17 suits are pending, not counting the California cases.

"It is a widespread problem and nothing's been done about it to protect these children, to protect future children," alleged Bill Brelsford, one of the Sacramento attorneys who filed four lawsuits Thursday, in Napa, Yolo and Tehama counties. "Once the [church leaders] know about it, they don't do anything to stop it."

Bowen said he has posted more than 1,000 abuse stories on his Web site, and fielded more than 6,000 complaints since 2001. The church puts its membership at 6 million worldwide, including 1 million in the United States.

Some of the allegations date to the 1970s. The perpetrators in the California complaints were convicted, but the suits allege church officials didn't do enough to stop the molesters before they were caught.

Last year, church members or elders in Tennessee and Kentucky were banned from the church after they went public with allegations the denomination has protected pedophiles.

One, Barbara Anderson of Tullahoma, Tenn., worked as a researcher at Watchtower Bible and Tract Society headquarters in the early 1990s, when she said a church official

asked her to look into the handling of sexual abuse cases. She said she found hundreds of allegations kept secret in church files.

"We abhor child abuse," responded Brumley. "The assertion or allegation of a cover up, or a nonchalance about child abuse, is just so far from the truth."

Allegations against the Jehovah's Witnesses and similar complaints against the Catholic Church prompted lawmakers in Canada and Kentucky to consider bills that would end legal confidentiality protections for confessions of child abuse or neglect.

Last month, a New Hampshire judge ruled Jehovah's Witnesses elders were not required to report alleged sexual abuse to state authorities because the ministers were protected by law from having to reveal confessions or confidential conversations.

In Texas last month, an Amarillo woman sued the Jehovah's Witnesses claiming an elder used his position in the church to sexually abuse her and other children. She alleges the organization's officials took no action to stop the man, and transferred him to a different congregation without warning church members there.

In January, four Nevada women sued, claiming they were molested by a since-convicted church leader from 1974 until the 1990s and that church officials covered up the abuse.

Last year, two Minnesota women sued, alleging church elders told them to remain silent about being sexually abused by a member when they were children.

Similar suits were filed last year in Maryland, Oregon and Washington by members who said church elders told them they would not be believed if they reported the molestations without corroboration by witnesses.

Brumley said the requirement stems from Biblical references that no single witness should rise up against any man. But he denied the church discourages victims or their parents from going to police, and said church officials report any abuse as required by any state laws.

Where molestation allegations are corroborated, the abuser is banned from the church, Brumley said, and is never again allowed to hold a position of authority if the excommunication is rescinded.

the calendar

Submissions to the calendar section can be sent via e-mail to jason_seymour@dailyjournal.com. The San Jose Post-Record does not guarantee publication for every event notice received. Please verify information with event sponsors before attending.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

All Medicare recipients should now be aware that if they suffer from conditions such as arthritis, cardiovascular disease and respiratory disorders, and have difficulty walking or propelling a standard wheelchair, they may be eligible to receive an electric wheelchair paid for by Medicare. For information on Medicare eligibility, contact Angels Have Wheels at (800) 810-2877.

The International Library of Photography invites locals to enter the **International Open Amateur Photo-graphy Contest**. Visit www.picture.com or call (410) 363-4800.

Teens and adult volunteers sought to help enhance the lives of children living in a homeless shelter by tutoring them in writing and spelling. Work with children one-on-one to help them write letters and use proper wording. Thursday and Friday from 6 to 9 p.m. Volunteers must be at least 14 years old; 9 with parent. Call (408) 247-1126.

Volunteers needs to promote promote, support and facilitate volunteerism by interviewing and referring potential volunteers to over 700 agencies that have opportunities. Call Marla Wright at (408) 247-1126 ext. 318 or e-mail volunteer@volunteerechange.org.

AUG. 2 TO 3

Workshop

9 a.m. 5 p.m. "Elder Mediation" by Margaret Dale & William Shea. \$144. MFT/LCSW/BRN/MCLE. Sonoma State University. Call (707) 664-2394.

AUG. 7

Workshop

Noon to 1:30 p.m. Brown Bag mediation presentation at BASF. Free. 465 California St, 11th fl. San Francisco. BASF. Call (415) 982-1600 for each month's topic.

AUG. 18

Networking Event

Almaden Valley Business Association Meeting
 The San Jose Silicon Valley Chamber of Commerce and the city of San Jose will co-host this 8 a.m.-9 a.m. event at Chevy's

CLASS ACTION NOTICE THE EASY WAY!
800-788-7840

ARE YOU LOOKING FOR A R