

Jehovah's Witnesses Settle Abuse Cases

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) -- A victims' rights group released documents Thursday that showed the Jehovah's Witnesses recently settled civil suits with 16 people who claimed they were sexually abused by church elders or that church officials failed to act on abuse allegations.

The group, called silentlambs, held a news conference in Nashville to demand that the denomination change its policy for responding to sex abuse reports.

Settlements were reached in late February and early March, according to court records obtained by silentlambs and posted to the group's Web site. Fourteen of the cases were filed in California; the other two were in Oregon and Texas.

Details about the settlement terms could not be disclosed under confidentiality agreements negotiated between the parties, said Stephen Owens, a plaintiffs' attorney involved in the California cases. Other cases are still pending, according to silentlambs, which couldn't say how many.

The Jehovah's Witnesses, whose headquarters are in Brooklyn, N.Y., said Thursday that they were pleased to see the lawsuits resolved, declining further comment.

"Our loving heavenly Father makes it clear in his Word, the Bible, that he abhors child abuse," a statement from the denomination said.

"As an organization, we will continually strive to educate families and congregations with sound Scriptural teachings that they can use to protect their children from child molesters. And we will continue to do our utmost to protect children from this horrible crime and sin."

William Bowen, silentlambs' founder, was a Jehovah's Witnesses elder from Kentucky who quit the denomination after he said it took no action against a molester. Bowen said the settlements were bittersweet.

"On one hand, we're glad a few victims are finally getting some financial help," he said. "On the other hand, we're sad and worried because they've essentially been forced to give up their right to protect others by speaking out about their abuse to the public."

Bowen's group has criticized the Jehovah's Witnesses' policy that if an accused abuser denies the charge, two credible witnesses are required to establish guilt -- due to literal application of such Bible verses as Deuteronomy 19:15 ("only on the evidence of two witnesses, or of three witnesses, shall a charge be sustained").

If two witnesses are lacking, the accused is deemed innocent, charges remain confidential and -- silentlambs says -- parents who warn others are subject to disfellowshipping for slander.

Disfellowshipping is an extreme penalty that means a total cutoff of relationships by family members, friends and business associates who are Witnesses.

There are about 1 million Jehovah's Witnesses in the United States, and followers are known for distributing Awake! and Watchtower magazines door-to-door.

Bowen also said Jehovah's Witnesses have a long-standing policy of not reporting molesters to police. He claims that the denomination has a secret database of accused abusers that they have not shared with law enforcement officials.

"They keep putting innocent kids and unsuspecting families at risk of horrible crimes because they value their secrecy and reputations more than they value children's safety," Bowen said.

Since establishing silentlambs in 2001, Bowen says about 7,000 people who claim they were abused have contacted his group.

Angelique Taylor, 42, a silentlambs member from St. Louis, said she was molested by a Jehovah's Witnesses elder when she was about 12. Taylor said she told her father, who was also an elder, and he said she was making a big deal out of nothing.

"I want every elder, every Jehovah's Witness, whenever they suspect any abuse, they go to the police and tell them about the problems," Taylor said. "The devastation of sex abuse is unbelievable."

Associated Press reporter Allison Hoffman in San Diego contributed to this report.

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On the Net:

silentlambs: <http://www.silentlambs.org>

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