

Witness Name: Robert KER
Statement No.: WITN1524001
Dated: 6 April 2023

ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE

WITNESS STATEMENT OF ROBERT (BOB) KER

I, **Robert KER**, say as follows: -

INTRODUCTION

1. My full name is **Robert KER**. I go by Bob for short. I was born on 1948.
2. I am giving this statement about my experience as a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses church between 1976 and 2005. I was an Elder of the church and was aware of abuse happening which was reported to the church, and nothing was done about it.

WHO I AM

3. I reside in
4. I am one of ten kids, seven sisters and two brothers. I was brought up in a rural area, a country boy.
5. I was not brought up with any form of religion, I would not say I was an atheist, but I was pretty neutral.
6. My wife and I were not long married, and we had our first child when we had what could be classed as a paranormal experience and it rocked my thinking. When something like that hits you, it makes you think.
7. At that time when the paranormal experience happened, the Jehovah's Witnesses had been talking to my wife. One thing led to another, and we eventually studied with the Witnesses.

MY EXPERIENCE OF BEING IN THE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

8. I was a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses from 1976 to about 2005.
9. There was a lot of pressure at that time when we joined – 1975 was a big year for them because they reckoned the end was going to come then.
10. We thought about it, and there was a lot of pressure on us to be baptised, but we thought nope, that is not a good reason to become a Christian just because you think you are going to save yourself. Not long after that, 1975 came and went and we decided to get baptised in about 1976.

11. Over a period, we had kids and stuff and moved around a bit. I poured a lot of my physical and monetary resources into the Jehovah's Witnesses. All the time, I was having more and more misgivings because of things that were going on.
12. The Jehovah's witnesses call their whole thing the "Truth." The best way I can explain it having experienced the lies and corrupt behaviour is "the Truth" is a brand or a label. The women are called sisters and the men are called brothers.
13. The Jehovah's witnesses have a hierarchical structure. They have ministerial servants in the congregation and then they have Elders who have oversight over the ministerial servants, this structure extends down to the rank and file that go door to door.
14. The Jehovah's Witnesses are taught to believe that Elders are appointed by the holy spirit. Officially they are only meant to look after the congregation's spiritual needs but in my experience, they got involved in all sorts of things.
15. There is a Presiding Overseer over the Elders. Further up the line, they have the Circuit Overseers that come around and they regionally supervise the different congregations. At the top of the tree at that time, they had what was called a District Overseer. They might have the title for a couple of years and then someone else will have it.
16. At that time, they had a branch in Auckland. That is no longer there now as it was moved to Australia. That branch was called the Bethel. Further up the line, in Brooklyn, New York they have a Governing Body, and it has oversight over the whole world's activities. That governing body is made up of a group of all men who claim that they have oversight over Gods only true religion.
17. Jehovah's Witnesses is a very male dominated religion. I recognise all around the world the prevalence of sexual deviancy in male dominated societies. Now, I am strongly opposed to male dominated societies.
18. I was an Elder and part of the Waiheke Island congregation before moving to Nelson. The congregation was in a very sad state when we moved there but quite healthy on our departure. The issue had been that many Elders had left because the Presiding Overseer was GRO-B who had been in the congregation as was her husband.

ABUSE IN THE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

19. When I came to Nelson, I don't know if my reputation proceeded me, but a lot of the sisters in the Nelson congregation came to me telling me stuff and I became aware of a lot of sexual abuse within the Jehovah's witnesses. It was all too believable. They were scared to talk because they had been put down, there had been a methodology involved in the process of putting them down. They would use bible scripture as a method to control people.
20. Things grew from there; I was having more doubts. I was keeping my head down a bit, but I was rocking the boat and I was asking questions at Elder's meetings.

21. There were so many things, there were cases of real deviancy. I think the culmination of it was, there was a guy here that was the Presiding Overseer and I had strong misgivings about this guy. When I came to Nelson I was warned by one of the other Elders that he was a loose cannon acting on his own and with another Elder as opposed to working with a group of Elders as would normally happen.
22. There was a drive to appoint people to Ministerial Servant and Elder positions. I hadn't been in Nelson that long, but at one of the Elder meetings they wanted to put someone forward to become an Elder. I asked how long he had been one of the Jehovah's Witnesses, it was about two to three years. I remember saying that seemed like an incredibly short amount of time because you are dealing with people's private lives and all sorts of stuff. I was not listened to, but I remember clearly expressing the view.
23. Lots of things happened. One of the sisters came to me with, I think the biggest one, at a time when my wife, who lives in Australia now, had [GRO-B] [GRO-B]. She had two major times in hospital. So, I was pulling away from the Jehovah's Witnesses because you can only deal with so much at once, I wasn't acting as an Elder anymore and I wasn't even attending meetings. I found dealing with my wife a difficult time, I didn't need any more difficult stuff.
24. A guy called [GRO-B-1] was appointed as a ministerial servant. He married a woman called [GRO-B-2]. From what I understand, they did not have a normal sexual relationship. [GRO-B-1] groomed the situation so he could get at her two sons.
25. One thing led to another and [GRO-B-3] the older boy had gone to Australia. [GRO-B-3] was one of [GRO-B-1] step sons. He came back and laid some charges. It went to Court and [GRO-B-1] was convicted of one of the charges, but it never got in the paper, and it was all hushed up in the congregation. I talk about this later in paragraph 42.
26. One of the sisters came to me and said that [GRO-B-1] was looking after other Jehovah's Witnesses kids. I was deeply concerned. I tried to contact the Elders and it was not productive. So, I got in touch with the parents of these kids he was babysitting, I went around and talked to them and told them exactly what the story was because I saw it as a personal responsibility.
27. Those parents started hounding the Elders and asking questions. The parents just got the run around They wanted to get answers from them because the Elders are supposed to protect the congregation.
28. One thing led to another, and it got worse. I couldn't get any information from the Elders, and they wouldn't talk to me. I talked to the Presiding Overseer, [GRO-B-4] who had a lot to do with [GRO-B-1]. I went to [GRO-B-4]'s house, and I walked out the door when he started telling lies.
29. We had another conversation on the phone, I asked [GRO-B-4] "next time you are down at the hall and have a meeting with the Elders, just ring me and I will come down there and talk to the body of Elders." That is how it was supposed to be done, with everyone. I have seen too much stuff get hidden just dealing with ones and twos. I wanted everyone to hear what I had to say.

30. A couple of days later I got a call, so I went down to the hall, and to no surprise, there was just two of them, [GRO-B-4] and Les Armstrong who was an Elder. We had a brief clash and I walked back out the door. If there is someone like [GRO-B-1] in the congregation, the congregation is supposed to be warned about them, there is supposed to be something put in place.
31. They have what they call judicial committees to meet over wrongdoing, there is usually three Elders involved. Clearly with what [GRO-B-1] had done. There should have been at least public reproof, but nobody in the congregation was aware of anything. It was kept a secret.
32. I was trying to ascertain what procedures had taken place to deal with [GRO-B-1] and I didn't get anything.
33. The Circuit Overseer came around, I tried my best to find out what happened regarding [GRO-B-1]. I could not get a straight answer out of him, he just wanted to run. It was complete avoidance tactics.
34. I finished up by writing a letter to the branch in Auckland outlining the grave concerns that I had. One of those things was the deviant behaviour. They believe they are specially chosen by God and the only ones who will be saved. I said to them, for years and years I have read your magazines and literature and you have delighted in condemning the other religions. I said, "to my horror I discovered that the organisation I joined all those years ago is riddled with such behaviour."
35. I never got a written reply but, through the grapevine I was told that the District Overseer, [GRO-B-5] who was an old boy from down here was going to come down. Does anyone conduct a legitimate investigation by sending an old boy down to investigate?
36. I had a meeting with [GRO-B-5] I was able to choose a support person out of a bunch of the Elders, so I chose Owen. At the meeting was David McDonald, Owen Hoggard, [GRO-B-5], and me.
37. [GRO-B-5] was sitting at the table, and he had a hard briefcase with him on the table with the lid open. I think he was recording me. He obviously had the letter that I had written. He read an excerpt out of the letter about where I had written that 'to my horror the organisation was riddled with such behaviour', he was very sanctimonious and then it was the end of the discussion. This appeared to me to be just theatre to say that there had been a meeting. I was never asked to present my evidence or the facts. It was a farce.
38. Later, I heard that [GRO-B-5] was in town visiting. His mother lived in Nelson. I went around to see him. He was very uncomfortable, and he took me out to the garage for a chat. I asked him what was happening, he came out with a statement "you could be, slandering faithful servants of God." I looked at him and said, "which God might they be serving?" and I left.
39. I just wanted some closure. To some degree I had some closure with the Australian Royal Commission. They got them into Court. What they found absolutely vindicated what I said, but that was Australia.

40. There were two things that were found in the Australian Commission, firstly the scale of the offending that they found and secondly, it was the fact that they concealed it. I know it is the same here, the scale and concealment.
41. New Zealand Jehovahs Witnesses now comes under Australia, they sort of escaped the net. I know there are hundreds of victims out there in the Jehovah's Witnesses. I have only talked about a little of the definitive stuff in this statement. But there are literally hundreds of victims out there that are covered into shutting up.
42. Both GRO-B-3 & GRO-B-6 that I mentioned earlier GRO-B-1's stepsons are dead now. GRO-B-6 took his own life in about April 1999. From what I hear, GRO-B-3 died later of a GRO-C in Sydney. GRO-B-1's wife also had a daughter called GRO-B.
43. I went to GRO-B-6 funeral, and I got to talk to GRO-B-3 one on one GRO-B-1 had said to GRO-B-3 if you do not do it with me, I will do it with GRO-B-6. GRO-B-3 did not specify what GRO-B-1 had actually done to him. GRO-B-3 thought he was protecting GRO-B-6, but he found out that GRO-B-1 was also doing it with GRO-B.
44. The mother sided with GRO-B-1 and kicked the boys out. They were also boarding homestay boys from GRO-B.
45. GRO-B-3 told me the name of another young fella GRO-B-7 to talk to, again GRO-B-3 didn't tell me what, but told me to talk to GRO-B-7. I talked to GRO-B-7 dad, GRO-B-1 said to me, that GRO-B-7 had said to him that he knew it would come out eventually.
46. GRO-B-1 had a lot of the boys around somewhere and somehow one thing led to another, and I think GRO-B-3 instigated it because GRO-B-3 had been groomed. All these boys were jumping on the trampoline starkers, and I was told that GRO-B-1 was standing there watching and masturbating.
47. There is a process for dealing with issues within the Jehovah's Witnesses but within different congregations I would use the word cronyism. That is the best word I could use where they protect one another.
48. I have seen that process used properly but there has always been the excuse in the past with the one witness thing with cases of deviancy. In some things the Jehovah's Witnesses take the bible literally and it talks about there needs to be two or more witnesses to an event. Obviously, with deviancy there are not any other witnesses.
49. In my experience this is a faith that does not like scrutiny and is not transparent. Given that the members are so subservient it is the ideal playground for deviants, as the saying goes, 'a wolf in sheeps clothing'.
50. I would like to thank the Commission for allowing me to speak my truth, I been treated with dignity and respect and would like to dedicate this testimony to two deceased boys GRO-B-3 and GRO-B-6.

GRO-C

