

Resource for ISVAs

Working with victims and survivors from the Jehovah's Witnesses Community

Introduction and Overview

Purpose

The beliefs, cultures and experiences of specific groups or communities may impact on their ability or willingness to engage with ISVA services and report their experiences of sexual violence to the police.

It is imperative that all victims and survivors, regardless of their background, beliefs, religion, culture or community can access specialist sexual violence support and receive an equitable service that is conscious of and tailored to their specific needs.

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse highlighted in its 2021 report *Child protection in religious organisation and settings*¹ that the barriers to reporting sexual abuse within religious organisations (including the Jehovah's Witnesses community) are "numerous, varied and powerful – both organisational and cultural".

LimeCulture has developed this resource to assist ISVA services in identifying areas within their service delivery model that can be adapted to meet the needs of victims/survivors from/formerly from the Jehovah's Witnesses community, and to specifically support ISVAs in their work with this client group.

This resource has been developed in consultation with advocates formerly from or working with the Jehovah's Witnesses community and ISVA services who have supported members of the Jehovah's Witnesses community.

Aims

This resource aims to:

- Provide a brief background and summary of the beliefs of the Jehovah's Witnesses community.
- Highlight specific barriers for members of the Jehovah's Witnesses community in accessing ISVA support and engaging with ISVAs and professionals.
- Equip ISVAs with accurate information to inform practice and provide practical suggestions and tips to make ISVA services more accessible and equitable for the Jehovah's Witnesses community.

Terms

- The terms 'victim' and 'survivor' will be used interchangeably throughout this resource.
- The term 'witnesses' and 'members' will be used when referring to individual members of the Jehovah's Witnesses community and 'organisation' and 'congregation' will commonly be used to refer to the Jehovah's Witnesses community as a whole.

¹ *Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (2021): Child Protection in religious organisations and settings*

Jehovah's Witnesses

Background

Jehovah's Witnesses (137,000 members in the UK) are a non-trinitarian branch of Christianity, which originated in the USA in the late 19th century. 1879 saw the first publication of *Zions Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence*; the name 'Jehovah's Witnesses' was coined in 1931.

In Britain there are three organisations that make up the Jehovah's Witnesses community: the *Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Britain*, the *Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses*, and the *International Bible Students Association (IBSA)*. They are legal entities and registered charities. 'Watch Tower' and 'the Society' are commonly used to refer to the organisation of Jehovah's Witnesses as a whole.

Beliefs

Witnesses hold several unique beliefs: they believe God is 'Jehovah', Jesus Christ is 'God's agent', the Holy Spirit is 'God's active force in the world' and the Bible is considered 'Jehovah's inspired message'. Witnesses consider themselves apart from secular society, which they consider to be under the control of Satan and doomed to destruction at an imminent Armageddon, where only baptised Witnesses will survive. They believe that suffering is temporary, those who acknowledge Jehovah will become members of the millennial kingdom in which they will reside forever in paradise, and those who reject him will face complete extinction in the impending Armageddon.

Witnesses believe that modern life is under Satanic influence and are discouraged from having relationships with people who are not part of the faith – outsiders are considered bad influences or 'bad association'. There is strict separation from secular government, and a rejection of specific laws, politics, and participation in the military. Witnesses generally accept medical care but refuse blood transfusions. For other procedures that involve fractions of blood, these are a matter of conscience for individual members.

Witnesses reject most celebrations including Christmas, Easter, Saints Days, Halloween and Mother's / Father's Day. Birthdays are not celebrated. Witnesses have one annual celebration, *The Memorial of Christ's Death or The Lord's Evening Meal*. This is the commemoration of Jesus' death and sacrifice for humankind and usually takes place in and around the Easter period.

Living as a Jehovah's Witness

Witnesses are expected to live by strict codes of personal conduct and are governed by 'Elders' – a group of male leaders within the congregation. Females do not hold any positions within the organisation that are used to teach or hold authority. Congregational life is central, with members meeting weekly either at a Kingdom Hall or at rented meeting places.

Not all Jehovah's Witnesses will be fully believing or fully active individuals within the community, and there may be differing levels of engagement and adherence to the organisation's rules and conduct expectations:

- a fully believing, active individual (considered 'spiritually strong')
- a non-believing active individual (effectively they are acting the part)
- non-active, fully believing individual, perhaps disfellowshipped or simply stopped attending services (considered 'spiritually weak')
- an individual who no longer believes or practices.

Incidents of Abuse

Jehovah's Witnesses view child sexual abuse as a sin. Officially, the process within the community to report and respond to such allegations is as follows.

Witnesses are encouraged to report sins to the Elders. They may also be advised of their 'right' to report abuse to the police; however, most are wary of reporting anything outside of the organisation. Once an incident ('Sin') is reported to the Elders, an internal investigation is set up and led by two Elders. For an internal investigation to proceed, there must be:

- a. a confession from the accused, and/or
- b. at least two witnesses – this is known as the 'two-witness rule'.

Where the accused denies the allegation or there is only one witness, the matter is closed – 'left in Jehovah's hands'. The victim/survivor is to say no more on the incident/s.

Where one of the above criteria is met, a 'Sin' is established and an ecclesiastical (religious) judicial committee of three Elders is appointed. They conduct an internal quasi-judicial process which involves intense questioning of both the accused and victim/survivor. Where the Elders deem the accused repentant, the accused is declared 'reproved' and can remain a member of the congregation. However, should the Elders deem the accused unrepentant of their sin, this can result in the accused being 'disfellowshipped'. When a Witness is disfellowshipped, other members, including friends and family, are expected to have no contact with the shunned individual. A disfellowshipped member may repent and be reinstated into the faith after a non-defined period.

Furthermore, in both scenarios, the victim/survivor is expected to forgive the accused, this can be particularly traumatic. Where the victim/survivor is expected to remain in the community with their abuser this can present as an ongoing risk to them, to others within the community, and the general public.

Victims/survivors will often remain within the congregation, with only spiritual support being given. This involves prayer, being directed to scriptural passages, and provided with religious materials to study. Some victim/survivors may find this is unhelpful and either seek outside help or leave the organisation entirely. Leaving the organisation invariably results in them being 'shunned'.

Barriers to Support

Many barriers exist for the Jehovah's Witnesses community when accessing any form of external support:



Witnesses' religious beliefs, beliefs regarding secular society, satanic influence and 'bad association', are significant and are likely to prevent or make it extremely difficult for them to make initial contact with mainstream services/ISVA services.

For victims/survivors of sexual abuse, initial and continued engagement with ISVA services may prove to be problematic and differ depending on how active an individual has been within the community. For example, core members ('spiritually strong') are more likely to practice extreme versions of shunning or disfellowshipping – they have the most to lose from leaving the organisation and may be unreachable for mainstream services. Those who are less active in the community ('spiritually weak') are unlikely to fully shun or disfellowship friends and family and may, to some extent, be reachable by mainstream services given the opportunity and the right approach.

Advocates working with the Jehovah's Witnesses community report that victims and survivors of sexual abuse are keen to access help and support, but that services must be able to recognise and respond to the barriers individuals face, adapting their practice to enable engagement. Information and support options need to be delivered in a way that demonstrates understanding of the community and promotes safety.

Practice Adaptations

In response to the barriers that can exist for Jehovah's Witnesses when accessing services and support, ISVA services may choose to consider the following questions:

- How can ISVA services ensure members of the Jehovah's Witnesses community are able to access and engage with services for crucial support?
- How can equitable and tailored support be delivered to this community?
- How can practice, protocols and ISVA support models be adapted to meet the specific needs of this community?
- How does the background and dynamic of this community impact on initial and subsequent risk and needs assessments? Are specific needs and/or risks heightened?

Active Status

It is important to establish the status of the individual with respect to the community as this will impact on your support, engagement, and ability to communicate safely. They may be:

- a fully believing, active individual (considered 'spiritually strong')
- a non-believing active individual (effectively they are acting the part)
- non-active, fully believing individual, perhaps disfellowshipped or simply stopped attending services (considered 'spiritually weak')
- an individual who no longer believes or practices.

Some areas ISVA services may wish to explore are detailed in the following section.

1 Beliefs & Closed Community

Witnesses' belief that outsiders are bad influences or 'bad associations' extends to a distrust of external services and professionals. This, along with the closed nature of the organisation, means contact between mainstream services and fully believing/active Jehovah's Witnesses is rare. If contact is made with external services this is most likely to be from less active or ex- members of the organisation, or as a final call for help.

Members may feel conflicted about approaching external services for support and/or unable to tell someone in their community about the abuse.

Victims/survivors may fear one or more of the following:

- The stigma and social consequences of involving 'outsiders' in matters traditionally handled internally
- Being viewed as an 'apostate' for criticising the organisation
- Being 'shunned' or 'disfellowshipped'
- 'Bringing reproach on God's name'

Top Tips for ISVAs:

- > Be empathic, promote options and assure safety. Demonstrate a good awareness of background, beliefs, terminology and acknowledge the difficulty and potential impact of the decision to seek external support.
- > Due to belief systems and mistrust of external services, it may take a long time for trust to be established. Additional sessions and assurances may need to be provided.

“ My client didn't want to report, even though he was an ex-member. It wasn't a physical risk, he was intimidated by their presence, he felt like he was being watched – he was frightened. ”

Ady – ISVA, Victim Support, West Yorkshire

Religious leaders usually hold significant power and authority within the community and disclosing abuse and/or making reports against leaders may present as a significant barrier for victims/survivors. As Elders within the Jehovah's Witnesses community can only be men, female survivors of abuse may find it difficult to disclose their experiences to male leaders. Victims/survivors may disclose feeling intimidated by community/religious leaders, even when they have left the community.

“ Members of the community attended the trial. I think my client felt intimidated even from behind the screen just knowing they were there, even I felt it. ”

Ady – ISVA, Victim Support, West Yorkshire

Top Tips for ISVAs:

- > Risk and intimidation from the community and third parties is an important consideration when risk and needs assessing and should not be underestimated as a barrier to accessing ISVA support and/or making a report to the Police.

Many victims/survivors feel unable to speak to 'outsiders', search for support online or reach out via the telephone. It may be impossible for an individual to be in possession of information leaflets.

It may also be extremely difficult for ISVAs to maintain regular contact with a client from the Jehovah's Witnesses community due to their concerns of being found conversing with external services and considered 'spiritually weak', an 'apostate', or facing the threat of disfellowship.

Top Tips for ISVAs:

- > Consider how victims/survivors will access information and resources, communicate with ISVA services, and attend appointments as they may not be able to be in possession of physical resources, have access to online information, be able to speak freely on the phone or routinely come to appointments.
- > Consider reaching out to any specialist services who support Witnesses leaving the organisation to further promote ISVA support and establish referral pathways. Victims/survivors who are not fully active may be more reachable by mainstream services and it is imperative that frontline services are able to provide information about ISVA support when safe and confidential opportunities arise.

“ Being ostracised and cast out of the community was her biggest fear, if this happened, she felt she would have nothing. ”

Ady – ISVA, Victim Support, West Yorkshire

All victims/survivors, regardless of active status in the Jehovah’s Witnesses community, can experience isolation under different circumstances:

Active/believing members may feel unable to disclose the abuse to their community and/or feel insufficiently supported following a disclosure – especially if the accused remains in the community. They have the most to lose from leaving the organisation and may be considered unreachable by mainstream services.

Former members who have either left or been disfellowshipped may be isolated from the congregation, their family, and other Jehovah’s Witnesses. This can have adverse impacts on their mental health and emotional well-being. It can also prompt practical issues for housing, employment, and education.

Members who are non-believing or less active in the community may feel they don’t belong to either the Witnesses community or the ‘outside’ community. They may even have a sense of belonging to both, which may be mentally exhausting.

Top Tips for ISVAs:

- > Understand and acknowledge that active, inactive, and former members may be isolated in different ways. For victims/survivors who have left the community or who have been disfellowshipped, contact with friends, family and community will likely have ceased and they will not know who to trust or turn to on the outside. Some may have been shunned or disfellowshipped but may still be fully-believing individuals.
- > Be empathetic and sensitive to their individual circumstances and adjustment into mainstream society as this will likely have an all-encompassing impact on a victim/survivor’s life, health, and well-being. Victims/survivors will require a holistic support response to address social isolation, housing, employment, and health needs.

“ I found the biggest barrier was how tightly knitted the family and community was... my client had to put her trust in someone higher up in the community which included permission to speak to someone in the police. ”

Heather – ISVA

Victims/survivors who are considering disclosing abuse face significant internal barriers in the form of the two-witness rule and intensive victim interrogation. The two-witness rule fails to reflect the reality of sexual abuse, which is predominately perpetrated in private, without witnesses. The rule inevitably results in silencing of victims/survivors and protection of perpetrators.

The internal investigation process within the organisation differs significantly from mainstream justice systems. However, the terminology used is similar and this can leave victims/survivors feeling that a legal process has been carried out, when in fact it was an internal 'spiritual' process.

Internally, it is the Elders' responsibility to bring 'sinners to repentance' and provide pastoral support to the victim/survivor and their family. Perpetrators of abuse who are deemed by the Elders to be repentant are sometimes able to stay or return to their congregation – this poses a risk to the victim/survivor and others within the community.

All of these realities mean victims/survivors are less likely to report their abuse internally or trust in the Jehovah's Witnesses' internal process to deliver justice, support, and safety.

While victims/survivors are informed of their right to report externally as part of the internal process, they are often discouraged from doing so and therefore, the criminal justice process is unlikely to be accessed or understood. Statutory safeguarding processes are often not initiated and external specialist support (such as ISVA support) is almost never arranged or utilised.

Top Tips for ISVAs:

- > The promotion of options and choices is paramount for empowerment. Be clear that victims/survivors seeking support from external services will not be pressurised to report to the police as this is likely to lead to prompt disengagement.
- > The differences in internal and external justice systems will be unfamiliar and detailed explanations required. Differentiate between the internal system – which focuses on sin and repentance – in comparison to the external justice system – which focuses on crime, punishment, prevention and victim support.

Forgiveness is expected from the victim/survivor to maintain a relationship with God and remain in good standing within the congregation. This process can have a significant impact on the victim/survivor's well-being and the way in which the community responds may result in the internalisation of blame and shame.

For victims/survivors who are abused by relatives, additional barriers may include feelings of love and responsibility for maintaining family units and family dynamics which are often shattered by disclosures of sexual violence.

The expectation of forgiveness, the responsibility of maintaining family units and the possibility of perpetrators remaining within the community may all contribute to a victim/survivor remaining silent and feeling unable to report their experiences of sexual abuse.

Top Tips for ISVAs:

- > Understand and empathise with internalised feelings or conflicts such as shame, blame and the scriptural expectation of forgiveness. Consider the safety risks to the victim/survivor (and others) if the perpetrator remains in the community – including the emotional impact on victim/survivors following repentance.

Language/Terms to be familiar with

Apostate	A former member who has now been characterised as promoting beliefs contrary to those of the religion. They may have been labelled as 'poison', 'mentally diseased' or 'spreading lies' by the organisation.
Bad Association	Those inside or outside the organisation can be classed as 'bad association' and experience a degree of shunning simply for behaviour deemed undesirable or 'spiritually weak'.
Congregation	A local group of Witnesses (usually between 30 to 100+ congregants) who usually meet twice weekly either at local meeting halls or virtually.
Disassociated	Witnesses who have formally made known their wish to no longer be associated with the religion.
Disfellowship	Excommunicated/expelled from the organisation. This may be due to the individual committing a 'gross sin'. As defined by the Witnesses, this includes promoting beliefs that are contrary to currently held doctrines.
Elders	Witnesses don't have priests or pastors, they have Elders. There are usually several Elders per congregation. Elders are highly respected and have a measure of authority. They are always male and are deemed to meet the spiritual requirements. No secular education or qualification is required.
Field ministry Field service	Terms used to describe preaching work of Witnesses such as door-to-door preaching or 'public witnessing' using literature carts.
Good Standing	A Witness perceived to be 'spiritually strong' is in 'good standing' with the congregation. The Witness has not been 'disfellowshipped' or 'marked' and they may attend meetings and freely socialise with other Witnesses.
Gross Sin	A gross sin is an offence which can result in being disfellowshipped. 'Gross sins' can include Porneia (see below), gross uncleanness, brazen conduct, drunkenness, gluttony, stealing, lying, fraud, greed, fits of anger, manslaughter, and apostasy.
Judicial Committee	Following an investigation by Elders, a judicial committee is formed, either when the accused person confesses or there is found to be sufficient evidence of guilt. The committee usually consists of three Elders from the congregation. Their remit is to determine whether the wrongdoer is repentant or unrepentant. Repentant = 'reproval' (forgiven). Unrepentant = 'disfellowshipped'.

Kingdom Hall	Place of worship where meetings are usually held twice weekly. Congregations unable to build or acquire a kingdom hall can hold meetings at rented facilities or virtually.
Marked	Disorderly behaviour can result in being 'marked'. Marking begins when a talk is given before the congregation identifying the person by their behaviour, but not by name. During this period the congregation are forbidden from socialising with the individual, and they are restricted from certain congregation activities. The end of the marking is signalled by Elders recommencing association with the individual, but no announcement is made of this.
Porneia	Porneia translates to 'sexual immorality'. Considered a gross sin, porneia refers to 'immoral use of the genitals, whether in a natural or in a perverted way, with lewd intent'. Porneia includes 'fornication' (sex before marriage), homosexual acts, adultery, rape and child sexual abuse.
Reinstatement	A disfellowshipped or disassociated person must submit a request in writing to the congregation Elders, should they wish to be reinstated. The judicial committee that disfellowshipped the person will meet with the individual after a subjective period of time to decide whether they are repentant. If it is felt by the Elders that they are repentant then an announcement is made and the person returns as a full member of the congregation.
Reproof	<p>An individual brought before a judicial committee who is found repentant is reproofed rather than disfellowshipped, and they are restricted from certain congregation activities.</p> <p>In cases where the sin is likely to become widely known within the community, a public reproof would be given, with the person being named to the congregation without detail of the sin. Otherwise, the reproof might be given privately.</p>
Shunning	Varying levels of shunning can be experienced. Members will deliberately avoid all contact or having any dealings with those who have been disfellowshipped. This includes family members unless they are living in the same home e.g. parents with a disfellowshipped minor child, where spiritual contact would be limited. Milder forms of shunning, such as avoiding social contact, will be applied to those seen as 'bad association' or who have been 'marked'.
Two-witness rule	An interpretation of a Bible-based principle requiring testimony of two material/credible witnesses to establish a perpetrator's sin (offence). In the absence of a confession, without two witnesses, no judicial committee will be established.

Further Reading and Resources

Independent Inquiry Into Child Sexual Abuse:

Child Protection in religious organisations and settings, Investigation Report, 2021

www.iicsa.org.uk/key-documents/26895/view/child-protection-religious-organisations-settings-investigation-report-september-2021.pdf

Jehovah's Witnesses official website

www.jw.org/en

Facts about Jehovah's Witnesses

www.jwfacts.com

Website of shunned Jehovah's Witnesses

www.avoidjw.org

Speak to Protect: information and training

www.speaktoprotect.org

Help and support for ex Jehovah's Witnesses

www.exjwsupport.co.uk

Religion Media Centre

www.religionmediacentre.org.uk/factsheets/jehovahs-witnesses

