

Updated

Abuse allegations in Newfoundland casting a cloud over Jehovah's Witnesses

Former church elder, son facing sexual offences; police confirm same complainant in both cases

By Terry Roberts, [CBC News](#) Posted: Jan 14, 2016 6:49 AM NT Last Updated: Jan 14, 2016 2:16 PM NT

Allegations of abuse involving two members of the Jehovah's Witness religious movement in Newfoundland have emerged, though details of the charges are protected by a court-ordered publication ban.

CBC News has learned that a former volunteer church elder and his son are facing charges.

The former elder is charged with sexual assault and sexual exploitation relating to allegations dating from 2009 to 2012 in central Newfoundland.

According to court documents, a second man is charged with sexual assault, with the information referencing a period between May 2011 and December 2013 in a community on the Avalon Peninsula.

CBC News has confirmed that the pair are father and son.

The RCMP also confirmed Thursday that both cases involve the same complainant.

A sexual exploitation charge involves anyone in a position of trust or authority who commits an offence against a young person.

The matter involving the older accused was called at a provincial court on Wednesday.

It was set over until next month, when a date is expected to be set for trial.

The younger accused is scheduled to make a court appearance later this month.

'We're all human'

The father of an alleged victim told CBC News it's been a difficult time for his family.

The father said he is still involved with the Jehovah's Witness, and spoke in a forgiving tone.

"Things happen. We're all human. No matter what religion you're of, things can happen," he said.

CBC News also spoke briefly with the former elder. He declined comment, but did say he is still involved with the church.

The man did not appear in court Wednesday, but is expected to plead not guilty.

An RCMP spokesman said he could not comment on either case because of the publication ban. However, he stressed that officers take such allegations very seriously.

Members throughout the province

A member of the congregation linked to both of the accused said that it has been a difficult time, but declined to comment.

Jehovah's Witnesses are a U.S.-based religious movement with an estimated eight million followers worldwide, including about 1,200 members in Newfoundland and Labrador, with churches known as a Kingdom Hall in communities throughout the province.

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They are Christians, but have sometimes been described as an insular sect.

The essence of their movement is to serve as God's "witnesses."

Followers are best known for door-to-door evangelism, and free publications called *Awake!* and *The Watchtower*.

They also follow strict rules that prohibit, among other things, sex outside of marriage, homosexuality, smoking and drugs.

The movement has also made headlines for refusing to allow blood transfusions, even when a life is at risk, and to refuse to celebrate occasions such as Christmas, Easter and birthdays.

Co-operating with police

In Canada, the movement is headquartered in Georgetown, Ont., outside Toronto.

'We do abhor that kind of wickedness ... and we do not protect any of these individuals and we allow the authorities to do their work' - *Simon Picard*

CBC News spoke with Simon Picard at the Jehovah's Witnesses "public information desk" in Georgetown.

When asked about the charges, he also referenced the ongoing investigation and publication ban, but strongly condemned any abuse against young people.

"How we feel about child sexual abuse has been very clear for years now," said Picard.

"We do abhor that kind of wickedness ... and we do not protect any of these individuals and we allow the authorities to do their work."

Picard confirmed the older accused is no longer a church elder, and that the church is co-operating with the investigation.

He also stressed that the Jehovah's Witnesses have measures in place to protect members of the church.

"Our publications give all kinds of tools to our parents on how to teach and train their children to be protected from these kind of things," he said, adding the organization's [website](#) also offers tips.

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