

Jehovah's Witnesses must pay more than \$20 million in Fremont sex abuse case

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OAKLAND -- A jury has ordered the Jehovah's Witnesses to pay more than \$20 million to a woman who accused the religion's national leaders of setting a policy of secrecy that led a Fremont congregation's elders to protect a convicted sex offender who she claims molested her in the 1990s.

An Alameda County Superior Court jury on Thursday awarded \$21 million in punitive damages -- and another \$7 million in compensatory damages the previous day -- to plaintiff Candace Conti, a San Joaquin County resident.

"It was the nation's largest verdict for a victim of sex abuse involving a religious institution," said Rick Simons, the plaintiff's Hayward-based attorney.

The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York -- the organization overseeing the Jehovah's Witnesses -- must pay Conti nearly \$24 million, covering all of the punitive damages and 40 percent of the compensatory damages.

Jonathan Kendrick, the congregation member whom Conti accused of molesting her, has been ordered to pay 60 percent of compensatory damages.

Jim McCabe, an attorney for the congregation, said he was very disappointed with the verdict and plans appeal it.

"The Jehovah's Witnesses hate child abuse and believe it's a plague on humanity," McCabe said. "Jonathan Kendrick was not a leader or a pastor, he was just a rank-and-file member. This is a tragic case where a member of a religious group has brought liability on the group for actions he alone may have taken."

Conti, now 26, was repeatedly molested by Kendrick from 1995-96, when she was 9 and 10 years old and a member of the North Fremont Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses, Simons said.

The lawsuit claims Watchtower formed a policy in 1989 that instructed the religion's elders to keep child sex abuse accusations secret. The North Fremont congregation elders followed that policy when Kendrick was convicted in 1994 of misdemeanor child molestation in Alameda County, Simons said.

"That abuse case had been reported to the elders," he said. "But they kept it secret and didn't do anything to stop him from molesting more kids."

Kendrick, a registered sex offender, was convicted in 2004 of molesting another girl in Contra Costa County, Simons said.

"That policy is still in place and it was a secret until, through the power of the court, it was put into evidence," he said. "That policy was what this case was all about."

Criminal charges have not been filed against Kendrick in the Conti case, but Simons said authorities are investigating. Sources confirmed the investigation but declined to comment further.

McCabe said there is a lot of dispute regarding the plaintiff's accusations.

"But if she was, in fact, abused then we feel horrible, and hope she can make a full recovery and lead a normal life," he said.

Kendrick, now 58, lives in Contra Costa County, according to the state sex offender registry.

Conti said she had two main goals in filing the lawsuit last year against Kendrick, Watchtower and the North Fremont congregation: She wanted to protect children in the future and to encourage sex abuse victims who've been hurt by the policy of secrecy to come forward and make their voices heard.

"Nothing can bring back my childhood," she said. "But through this (verdict) and through, hopefully, a change in their policy, we can make something good come out of it."

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