

Associated Press (AP) News - February 25th 1998:

Lawsuit accuses church organization of not reporting sexual abuse

HOUSTON (AP) -- A Houston teen-ager has filed a lawsuit accusing the national Jehovah's Witness organization of failing to tell authorities that her brother was sexually abusing her.

Wednesday, February 25, 1998

Now 19, the woman says her brother, three years older than she, began sexually abusing her in the mid-1980s. In 1988, she says, her family sought counseling by church elder Kerry W. "John" Landers and told him of the assaults.

"Despite this knowledge and/or suspicion, Landers was instructed by the national Jehovah's Witness organization to handle the matter in-house rather than report such sexual abuse to the authorities, as required by Texas law," according to the lawsuit, filed by attorney John T. McDowell:

The brother was counseled to stop the inappropriate activity, but the church was advised that he was continuing to molest his sister.

The local Jehovah's Witnesses leadership in 1992 appointed Landers and two other elders "to 'investigate' the matter as a 'judicial proceeding,' " McDowell said in the suit.

During that action, the brother confessed, "apologized, said he wouldn't do it anymore, and the elders put the matter to rest without reporting the matter to the Texas authorities," the lawsuit says.

The brother was eventually convicted of sex abuse and sentenced to prison. Authorities were tipped off to the abuse when the sister was being treated for depression and told a hospital worker of the abuse.

During the trial, the church counselor testified under a grant of immunity that the church had said it wanted the matter kept "in-house."

That attitude of secrecy was changed after the criminal case, McDowell said.

Church attorney Jeffrey Parsons of Houston says the church strongly believes it did nothing wrong.

"We are sorry to see this come to litigation, but that is her right," Parsons said. He said further comment would be inappropriate.

Defendants include Landers and the national nonprofit groups that head the national church -- the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, and Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York Inc.

The suit seeks unspecified damages for "severe emotional and bodily injuries," compensation for medical and psychiatric treatment, and gross negligence.