

CNN/Connie Chung-Transcript

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Spanish Transcript

CHUNG: Most of us, I suspect, know the Jehovah's Witnesses only as the men and women who go door-to-door handing out literature about their faith. Jehovah's Witnesses are evangelical Christians, with about 1 million members here in the U.S. The movement was founded in the 1870s in Pennsylvania . Jehovah's Witnesses believe in the bible as the literal word of God. They do not allow blood transfusions, do not serve in the military or celebrate Christmas or birthdays.

Now, some members say that something awful is happening behind closed doors, a pattern of alleged child abuse that the religious organization has not only failed to report but, they say, has even helped to keep from the authorities.

Tonight we'll introduce you to two young women who say they've been victimized by a Jehovah's Witness member.

Joining us from Minneapolis to tell their stories in the first person are Heidi Meyer and Amber Long. Also joining us is a man who's tried to bring together alleged victims of abuse within the Jehovah's Witnesses. He's William Bowen, once an elder within the congregation who resigned his position two years ago in protest against the way the group deals with suspected abusers.

Welcome to all of you. Now, Heidi, you were 10 years old when you were first abused. What happened?

HEIDI MEYER, ALLEGEDLY ABUSED BY JEHOVAH'S WITNESS: The man who abused me...

CHUNG: Was a Jehovah's Witness?

MEYER: He was a Jehovah's Witness in my congregation. His name is Derrick Lindelah (ph). He was a friend of the family. He was friends with my brother and I was friends with his younger sisters, and whenever the opportunity arose or whenever he created an opportunity, he would pull me aside and molest me any chance he got.

CHUNG: How long did this go on, Heidi?

MEYER: Until -- into my 13th year. Just after I turned 13.

CHUNG: All right. And you reported this to the elders in the Jehovah's Witnesses. And what happened?

MEYER: When I was 15, I went to the elders with this, as we're instructed as Jehovah's Witnesses to do. And I spoke to them in the hopes of discontinuing this problem, and that they would step in and take care of this person.

CHUNG: Did they?

MEYER: No, they did not. They not only said that they thought I had misinterpreted his actions, but they also told me that I needed to be careful who I spoke to about this and what I said about this, because without two eyewitnesses to the situation, I could be faced with a judicial committee for gossip or slander.

CHUNG: Basically, do you think they were trying to tell you not to go to the police? MEYER: Absolutely. They said to go to the police and bring this matter to court would be a reproach on God's name and God's organization.

CHUNG: So you kept quiet.

MEYER: Absolutely. Under threat of -- under threat of excommunication.

CHUNG: Yes, from the Jehovah's Witnesses. And your whole family, your whole family belonged, so it meant something to you to belong, as well.

MEYER: Absolutely. Not only my family, but as a Jehovah's Witness, you associate only with members in good standing. And that leaves you in a position where everybody you know, everybody you trust, everybody you've ever known or trusted, is somebody who's inside that organization.

The threat of being thrown out of that and shunned from them is one powerful enough that kept me quiet for a long, long time.

CHUNG: All right, we'll get back to you, Heidi, in a minute. Amber, you claim that you were molested by the same man when you were 12 years old. What happened to you?

AMBER LONG, ALLEGEDLY ABUSED BY JEHOVAH'S WITNESS: Correct. I was at his parent's home. I was friends with his younger sister. And I was molested there. After that visit I went home and told my parents immediately, and we also went to the elders, as is directed in that religion.

CHUNG: And what happened?

LONG: They, you know, insinuated that it was a misunderstanding, that maybe I was upset, told us to come back and talk about it later. When I still stuck to my story, they told us there was really nothing they could do, because there wasn't two eyewitnesses. And again there was that veiled threat of being excommunicated.

And all my life, growing up after that, they, you know, made insinuations to the fact that perhaps it was something that I had done that warranted the abuse.

CHUNG: All right. Amber, we'll get back to you in a minute.

Bill, you've gone so far as saying that you believe that the Jehovah's Witnesses is a pedophile paradise. You know, are you exaggerating? I know you've investigated, but I think one would believe that you might be exaggerating here.

WILLIAM BOWEN, DIRECTOR, SILENTLAMBS.ORG: I've spoken to over 5,000 victims of abuse either through e-mail or direct phone contact. I have an abuse hotline that rings into my home, and I get calls every day. All these people are abuse survivors that tell the same story as Amber and Heidi do. That is, that they went to the elders and they were suppressed, they were covered up.

It's a common thread. Yesterday I got a thread or an e-mail from a young girl, 15 years of age, she went to the elders, she said I am just like Heidi. And after seeing the recent media, I am angry that they would do this to me. And that's what most of these young ladies are. They're angry that they were abused and revictimized by the policies of this church.

CHUNG: Were you intimidated by the Jehovah's Witnesses?

MEYER: Absolutely. There is no option but to be intimidated. Your entire life revolves around your involvement in that organization. That is your entire life. And it's often referred to as such, in the organization. If you are ousted from that organization, it is a trauma in your life. There is an enormous upheaval. It is something that affects every single day of your life.

CHUNG: This is a statement from the Jehovah's Witnesses, and I'd like all of you to listen to it.

"We abhor the sexual abuse of children and will not protect any perpetrator from the consequences of this gross and perverse sin. We expect the elders to investigate every allegation of child abuse. Unrepentant wrongdoers are expelled from the congregation. Special care is taken to ensure the victims are given ongoing assistance and counsel that help them deal with the pain of the abuse. They should never be told by elders not to report their allegations to the authorities.

Amber, I can see you shaking your head.

LONG: I just -- that's just horrifying that they would write something like that. It's so untrue.

MEYER: You know, and it's a good practice on paper. But it's just not -- it's just not applied. In my situation, in Amber's situation, in countless numbers of situations across the nation, and into other countries, it's just not applied.

CHUNG: But why would they put out a statement like this which you claim is not correct?

BOWEN: That statement is a bald-faced lie, in my opinion. These people know the abuse has been covered up. Ten years ago, research was done in the organization that they knew multiple little girls were being molested. They were inundated with mail -- of "Awake" magazine that was written on this subject.

They refused to acknowledge it then, and the fact that it's went on this long, if they make any acceptance that there's a problem, then they admit they willfully have hurt children and not done anything about it.

Bill, you may very well be disfellowshipped (ph), which is essentially excommunicated from this congregation. And your father even made a video condemning you for your investigation of this sexual abuse problem. Doesn't that hurt?

BOWEN: Yes, it hurts deeply. And I don't hold it against him, because I know that he was intimidated just like these two young women were intimidated by the church to make that video, and have it distributed to the local media in this area...

CHUNG: Well, is it worth it to you to be ostracized by your own family?

BOWEN: You have to do what is ethically and morally right. And because people are pressured by religion to do what's ethically and morally wrong, that doesn't excuse that. And so, I'm compelled to go forward, to let these -- for these victims who have been victimized and revictimized by this church.

Many young women have been disfellowshipped when they tried to tell other members in the church that they were molested, simply because that they wanted -- the molester said that they didn't have two eyewitnesses when he raped these young women.

CHUNG: Heidi and Amber, what has happened to the member who you claim molested you?

MEYER: Absolutely nothing, to this day.

LONG: Nothing.

CHUNG: Is he a member in good standing?

MEYER: He is a member in good standing.

LONG: Yes, he is.

CHUNG: You -- both of you may very well be disfellowshipped. Are you prepared for that? And doesn't that mean that your family wouldn't talk to you anymore?

MEYER: Yes, it does mean that. But, you know, my parents raised me to be an independent thinker, a strong person, and someone who is just. And the evidence is so black and white in this situation, there is no alternative choice. There is no other avenue I could be taking with this.

CHUNG: Heidi, Amber, we so appreciate your being with us. And Bill, thank you as well.

And before we go, we should note that we spoke to the attorney for Derrick Lindelah, the man accused of molesting Heidi and Amber, and his lawyer told us that Lindelah would deny all accusations but that no formal answer has been filed yet in a civil suit brought by the two girls.