

WATCHTOWER

BIBLE AND TRACT SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA

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October 10, 2002

TO ALL BODIES OF ELDERS IN AUSTRALIA

Dear Brothers:

Some questions have arisen concerning the statement on page 2 of our letter *To All Congregations in Australia* dated August 28, 2002 : "We have long instructed elders to report allegations of child abuse to the authorities where required by law to do so, even where there is only one witness." This statement needs to be understood in the following context: (1) This was a general letter addressed to the congregation and not specifically to the elders; and (2) the Society has long instructed elders to follow the following procedure:

"When elders receive reports of physical or sexual abuse of a child, they should contact the Society's Legal Department immediately. Victims of such abuse need to be protected from further damage."-See letter AB:AS To All Bodies of Elders, August 25, 1989 , page 3.

"When a member of the congregation is accused of child molestation, the elders should contact the Society immediately. Some states make it mandatory that elders report an accusation to the proper authorities but other states do not. ... Before speaking to the one accused, the elders should contact the Society."-See letter SA To All Bodies of Elders, November 1, 1995 , page 1.

It must be appreciated that the question of child abuse is a complicated matter and that there can be no blanket direction given to the elders throughout the country, or even state by state. Whether or not they are "required by law to do so," can only be determined at the time when elders contact the Society after receiving a report of child abuse. If the law requires them to report the matter, the Society has always, at that time, advised elders to do so. Since there is no clear precise legal definition of "child abuse," and since laws may vary from state to state and are changed from time to time, it is only when all the facts of a particular case are available that proper direction can be given in such matters. Some elders have been concerned about the question of confidentiality, having in mind what the Scriptures say on the subject. (Proverbs 11:13 ; 15:22) If, after contacting the Society, it is determined that the elders should report a matter such as child abuse to the authorities, it would not be considered to be a breach of confidentiality to make such a report. At times, there may be other Bible principles that must be weighed against the need for confidentiality. (For example, see *Awake!* January 22, 1985 , page 8.) Nevertheless, elders should always be conscious of their Scriptural responsibility to keep matters confidential. In this way they can be "like a hiding place from the wind and a place of concealment from the rainstorm." (Isaiah 32:2; See also *The Watchtower* April 1, 1971, pages 222-224.) However, there are times when elders must reveal confidential matters in order to protect the sheep. For example, Our Kingdom Ministry, April 1999, on page 7, stated:

"The question has been asked whether elders should supply information to secular authorities when they learn that a brother or sister has been involved in a serious crime. ... If an elder learns of some serious crime on the part of a member of the congregation, they may, in some circumstances, be obliged to report the matter, or provide information to secular authorities."

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In all such cases, the elders would want to reach any decision to report the matter or provide information to secular authorities only **after** consultation with the Society, as stated in Our Kingdom Ministry:

"Even in such cases, it is important that the elders maintain confidentiality to the extent possible, and elders should always contact the Society before providing any information on confidential matters to secular authorities."

We also want to encourage you to continue providing follow-up assistance for those who have been victims of child abuse. From time to time, the Society has provided assistance to elders to help them to become more effective shepherds, genuinely interested in the welfare of individuals under their care. (1 Peter 5:2.) For example, some helpful articles are: "Help for Victims of Incest"- *The Watchtower* , October 1, 1983; "Child Molesting-Every Mother's Nightmare" *Awake!* January 22, 1985 ; "How

Can We Protect Our Children?" and "Prevention in the Home" *Awake!* October 8, 1993 ; and "Let Us Abhor What Is Wicked!"- *The Watchtower* , January 1, 1997. While we do not take a secular approach in this regard, by imitating the tender qualities of our loving heavenly Father, Jehovah, and his Son, Jesus, much good can be accomplished in rendering assistance to those who have experienced abuse, or who have other distressing circumstances to deal with.-Matthew 11:28, 29.

To assist in protecting our young children, we are now asking the body of elders to write to the Society before allowing a former child molester to receive any privileges in the congregation that would indicate congregational approval. This would include the handling of microphones, being an attendant, working with the literature, volunteering at a convention or assembly, or even auxiliary pioneering.

We appreciate the time and effort you brothers expend in shepherding the sheep. Please accept our very warm Christian love and greetings.

Your brothers,

Watchtower B.&T. Society
OF AUSTRALIA