

Transcript of Australia Sunday Program

05/30/05

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Silent lambs

GRAHAM DAVIS: They're called the silent lambs — silent because they've kept their stories to themselves for so long, lambs because as children they were meant to be protected from predators in the Christian flock, but weren't.

SIMON THOMAS: I was the little sheep that needed help — and I'm one of thousands, probably — and they didn't come back to look after me properly.

GRAHAM DAVIS: We've met Simon Thomas before, in a *Sunday* report I did back in 2002 on the child abuse crisis in the Jehovah's Witnesses.

SIMON THOMAS: I remember that the first time he actually touched me and did something to me, I just, that was a real, it was a real life-changing moment.

GRAHAM DAVIS: Simon Thomas was 12 when he fell prey to this man — Robert Souter. Even when Souter admitted his crimes to church elders, he was allowed to continue as a Jehovah's Witness. He also continued to molest other children. Nearly three years on, Simon is joined by another of those victims. Only now is John Dingham able to confront his own demons, given alcohol and molested by Robert Souter when he was just 13.

JOHN DINGHAM: I was that drunk in fact that Robert had to carry me back to the 4-wheel-drive. And it was there that night that I was sexually abused, without being too graphic. Um, so, yeah, it was pretty much my first sexual experience and my first ever hangover.

GRAHAM DAVIS: At 13?

JOHN DINGHAM: Yeah.

GRAHAM DAVIS: But John is just one of the fresh cases we'll meet as we revisit this story and again confront the Jehovah's Witnesses over their handling of child abuse. Sonia Mortimer was six years old when a church member by the name of Dennis Evans forced her to have oral sex with him. Confessing all, Evans was suspended from the congregation for just nine months. And what do you think about that?

SONIA MORTIMER: Oh, angry, hurt, devastated.

GRAHAM DAVIS: What is going on in that church?

SONIA MORTIMER: I've got no idea. I've got no idea.

GRAHAM DAVIS: John? But now Sonia wants answers from the elder responsible — John Wyngate.

SONIA MORTIMER: Nine months is quite sufficient for a paedophile, someone that abused me, that made me (bleep). Nine months is good enough for that, is it? What if it was your daughter? What if it was your daughter? How would you feel? Would you feel as devastated? You had an office as far as the congregation was concerned and as far as I am concerned you abused that. Nine months is good enough? God knows what he's doing to other kids.

GRAHAM DAVIS: What have you got to say, John?

JOHN WYNGATE: Well, what can I say?

GRAHAM DAVIS: What indeed? And God knows what if anything Dennis Evans is doing to other kids. *Sunday* has traced him to the Nanango-Yarraman congregation in south-east Queensland. What would you say to him, under the circumstances, if he is watching?

SONIA MORTIMER: That I hope his life is ruined just as much as mine.

GRAHAM DAVIS: Whether or not the congregation here has been told Dennis Evans is a convicted paedophile, we can't establish. But, on previous form, probably not. For parents are sometimes kept in the dark even while their children continue to be molested. We'll call her Lyn. She's a mother whose son was being interfered with. The molester confessed to church leaders. She wasn't told. How do you feel about the fact that the elders didn't tell you?

'LYN': They knew that he was coming to my home. They knew what he had been doing to my child.

GRAHAM DAVIS: And in fact he says in this correspondence, doesn't he, "I told the elder what I did to Bo." There's proof ...

'LYN': Yes.

GRAHAM DAVIS: ... that they knew.

'LYN': Yes.

GRAHAM DAVIS: And they didn't tell you.

'LYN': No.

GRAHAM DAVIS: Do you regard that as a betrayal of the trust that you had in them as elders?

'LYN': Absolutely.

GRAHAM DAVIS: But as well as shielding child molesters among its ordinary members, there is evidence of paedophile activity in the church hierarchy. An elder in the church having sex with his teenage daughter. How do you think he feels about it now?

'JULIE': I don't know.

GRAHAM DAVIS: The victim we'll call 'Julie' is still considering whether to go to the police with her allegation, that as a teenager she was raped repeatedly by her father, a prominent elder and senior office bearer in the Jehovah's Witnesses in NSW. We're obliged to conceal her identity and his until the law takes its course.

'JULIE': I was told that I had to come home at lunchtime. Mum was never home, my older brother and sister weren't home, so it was just set up that my father could use that as a time to abuse me, I guess.

GRAHAM DAVIS: What happened?

'JULIE': He would get me. I would have to go into their room — this was several times a week —

GRAHAM DAVIS: Several times a week, he was having sex with you?

'JULIE': Yes.

GRAHAM DAVIS: How old were you?

'JULIE': It started when I was 13 and ended just as I turned 15.

GRAHAM DAVIS: This is a story of the most shocking betrayal, of hypocrisy, arrogance and, for those affected, untold pain. Three years ago, there was global outrage over an avalanche of allegations worldwide that the Jehovah's Witnesses were protecting paedophiles and ignoring the plight of their victims. Of course, they weren't alone. Mainstream churches, like the Roman Catholics and Anglicans, also came under fire for their policies on child abuse, an allegation of cover-up even forcing the resignation of Australia's Governor-General, former archbishop Peter Hollingworth. But while the mainstream churches were forced to confront their own misdeeds and introduce new protocols to protect children, have the Jehovah's Witnesses changed? On the evidence we'll hear today, not enough. Do you still insist on at least two reliable witnesses to any act like this?

JOHN WYNGATE: Yes, we do.

GRAHAM DAVIS: You do? It is the principle that protects the paedophile. The extraordinary dictate we exposed three years ago in the Jehovah's Witnesses rule book: "There must be two or three eye witnesses, not just persons repeating what they've heard. No action can be taken if there is only one witness." Such an edict would simply not hold in an Australian court of law. Blind Freddy knows that a child abuser doesn't sit around waiting for two or three witnesses before doing anything.

JIM DONALD — 2002, EX-JEHOVAH'S WITNESS ELDER: That is correct.

GRAHAM DAVIS: How is it that this escapes the elders of the church?

JIM DONALD: They rely on a biblical text which says that all matters are to be established on the mouth of two or three witnesses.

GRAHAM DAVIS: And three years on, passages from Deuteronomy and Matthew are still used to justify the two-witness rule. In edicts from the Australian church's headquarters, or Bethel, on the southern outskirts of Sydney.

SIMON THOMAS: Nothing's changed.

GRAHAM DAVIS: And what do you think about that requirement?

SIMON THOMAS: Well, I think it's ridiculous. You tell me anybody that assaults a child, that waits until there's a couple of people that can watch them.

GRAHAM DAVIS: In the case of 'Julie', it was a standard of proof her abusive father, the church elder, used to taunt her.

'JULIE': I got told at the time that there was nothing I could do about it.

GRAHAM DAVIS: In what sense?

'JULIE': Well, I couldn't tell anybody because nobody would believe me.

GRAHAM DAVIS: But while your father was having sex with you he was saying, "You can't prove this without two witnesses?"

'JULIE': Yeah, that's right.

GRAHAM DAVIS: He specifically said that?

'JULIE': Yes. And then the only other elder in the congregation there was my father's best friend, so I didn't stand a chance. There was nobody I could talk to.

GRAHAM DAVIS: Small wonder that 'Julie' eventually tried to take her own life and that many silent lambs remain acutely distressed.

JOHN WYNGATE: We can't change what's happened.

SONIA MORTIMER: I don't want you to change it. I didn't ask you to change it. Did I ask you to change it?

JOHN WYNGATE: What would you like me to do?

SONIA MORTIMER: What would I like you to do? At this point, nothing, because you've done it.

JAMES KERR: Yeah, you do that well.

SONIA MORTIMER: You've done it.

GRAHAM DAVIS: I first caught up with John Wyngate in September 2002 when I asked him about his handling of the case of Simon Thomas, abused by Robert Souter when he was just 12. What that family wants to know is why he was reinstated into the church around six months later.

JOHN WYNGATE — 2002: Ring the Watchtower Society of Australia and they will answer all your questions regarding that situation.

GRAHAM DAVIS: Well, can you tell me, sir ...

JOHN WYNGATE: I cannot make comment on it.

GRAHAM DAVIS: Why can't you speak about it?

JOHN WYNGATE: Because I'm not at liberty to.

GRAHAM DAVIS: Why?

JOHN WYNGATE: Because I'm not.

GRAHAM DAVIS: You handled the case.

JOHN WYNGATE: That's none of your business.

SIMON THOMAS: I spoke to an elder down there and he said Robert Souter was repentant, so when you're repentant you are allowed back into the congregation.

GRAHAM DAVIS: It was the police who eventually established that as well as Simon, Robert Souter may have abused more than 40 other minors. But three years on, with new evidence centred on the congregation John Wyngate presided over as an elder — Cooma, in southern NSW. Just how many paedophiles are on its files the Australian church won't say but if the record in this tiny congregation is any guide, the scale of this scandal is truly frightening. Here in Cooma we have established that at least two paedophiles have preyed on young people in the congregation. Well, today comes the reckoning, as some of the victims speak out for the first time. I know this will be a difficult question for you to answer, but what was the nature of the abuse?

JAMES KERR: Well ... I've never told anyone.

GRAHAM DAVIS: Would you prefer not to?

JAMES KERR: It just hurts too much.

GRAHAM DAVIS: James Kerr is yet another of Robert Souter's victims. He has never told his story to the police or anyone else.

JAMES KERR: After, he said, "Why did you let me do that to you?"

GRAHAM DAVIS: So he was blaming you?

JAMES KERR: Yeah. He was blaming me for everything.

GRAHAM DAVIS: And have you felt that it was your fault?

JAMES KERR: My whole life, even now.

GRAHAM DAVIS: But while Robert Souter targeted the boys of the Cooma congregation, the girls fell prey to Dennis Evans. There's Sonia Mortimer, who we've met.

SONIA MORTIMER: It's had an impact on every aspect of my life — trusting, having relationships, yeah. It haunts me every day.

GRAHAM DAVIS: And someone who doesn't want her real name used but is willing to show her face.

'MARIE': He assaulted me in, uh, sexually assaulted. And forced me to perform oral sex. And he did that on three occasions.

GRAHAM DAVIS: Three occasions?

'MARIE': Yeah.

GRAHAM DAVIS: How old were you?

'MARIE': 13.

GRAHAM DAVIS: As we'll see, both abusers have been dealt with by the law. What's at issue is the church's handling — its critics say mishandling — of these cases. To understand the scope of this tragedy, some understanding is needed of the nature of the organisation whose representatives have knocked on virtually every Australian door.

PREACHER: We need to be zealous as proclaimers of God's kingdom, shining as illuminators of the world.

GRAHAM DAVIS: The Jehovah's Witnesses are officially known as the Watchtower, Bible and Tract Society, and unlike mainstream religious groups, see themselves as the only true faith. In fact, to be a Jehovah's Witness is to be in the truth, to be saved when the rest of us in the world are destroyed by Armageddon, God's day of judgment, that is supposedly just around the corner.

PREACHER: We pray, Father, that you will watch over them.

GRAHAM DAVIS: The *Sunday* program isn't just the work of Satan, the devil lurks at every turn in the apocalyptic hyperbole of Viv Mouritz, the church's Australian head.

VIV MOURITZ: If you decide you want to do some of your own thing, well, you can. Be careful, because this world is deceived. It's deceived by the devil.

GRAHAM DAVIS: Set apart from the big bad world, the 60,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in Australia can't celebrate Christmas or birthdays. They can't vote, join the military or marry outside the church. But what many don't grasp, say the critics, is something more fundamental — the brainwashing, the insidious hold the church has over its followers and the twisted logic of some of its teachings.

MIRIAM HUGHES, LECTURER, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA : Well, I'm disfellowshipped, which means I have been publicly removed from the congregation.

GRAHAM DAVIS: Adelaide academic Miriam Hughes fell foul of the sect for writing about its disempowerment of women.

MIRIAM HUGHES: With paedophilia and the complicated way in which Witnesses think, if a paedophile were to be deemed repentant by the elders in the congregation, he is in line for reinstatement within the congregation, and that also means redemption as far as God is concerned. But for someone like myself, if I were to ask to return to the congregation and to be allowed back into the congregation, I would be refused.

GRAHAM DAVIS: This letter to all elders says: "It is possible for a person to stop his or her wrongful course, repent and thereafter live in harmony with God's righteous standards. This is true of all wrongdoers, even a former child abuser." So all Robert Souter and Dennis Evans had to do was repent, and they were back among the children. The routine recidivism and cunning of paedophiles ignored — more victims, more abuse. Let's look at what happened when James Kerr went to the Cooma elders after Robert Souter had confessed to having sex with him.

JAMES KERR: First of all, one of them said to me, "Why didn't you come and confess your sins earlier?"

GRAHAM DAVIS: Confess *your* sins?

JAMES KERR: Yeah, *my* sins. And I was dumbfounded by that straight away. I was told that what had happened between me and Robert Souter was a homosexual act and that I was basically a homosexual and I'm no better than any other homosexual out there.

GRAHAM DAVIS: Who said that to you?

JAMES KERR: John Wyngate.

GRAHAM DAVIS: Is it true, John, that you said to James that he was a homosexual?

JOHN WYNGATE: No, it isn't.

JAMES KERR: Yes, it is.

JOHN WYNGATE: He has a different version of what I said at that meeting with himself and two other elders.

JAMES KERR: I had committed a homosexual act and I was the same as them. And we know what God will do to homosexuals.

GRAHAM DAVIS: What's that?

JAMES KERR: Well, they'll be destroyed at Armageddon.

GRAHAM DAVIS: Did you say that?

JOHN WYNGATE: I said to him, in front of the other members, that what had taken place between those individuals was a homosexual act.

GRAHAM DAVIS: It wasn't a homosexual act though, John, it was child abuse. It was abuse. And James wasn't the first that Robert Souter sexually abused.

JOHN WYNGATE: We were not aware of that at the time.

GRAHAM DAVIS: What sort of impact has it had on your life?

JAMES KERR: Sick of being depressed all the time. Sick of feeling suicidal all the time. Sick of thinking that nothing cares. I don't care what happens to me. I couldn't give a rat's arse.

GRAHAM DAVIS: Have they ever offered you, the church, any counseling whatsoever?

JAMES KERR: No. As far as they are concerned it was my fault. I hate them for that.

GRAHAM DAVIS: And then there's the abuse of Sonia Mortimer by the resident paedophile who preferred girls — Dennis Evans. It took Sonia 24 years to speak out about what had happened to her as a 6-year-old. Now, you told somebody you were living with, didn't you, what had happened. They then went to the church elder, didn't they?

SONIA MORTIMER: Yeah.

GRAHAM DAVIS: What was his name?

SONIA MORTIMER: John Wyngate.

GRAHAM DAVIS: What happened to Dennis?

JOHN WYNGATE: He was disfellowshipped from this congregation.

GRAHAM DAVIS: For how long?

SONIA MORTIMER: For nine months.

JOHN WYNGATE: For nine months. At that time they said they were quite happy with the disfellowshipping.

GRAHAM DAVIS: Is this true? After nine months he was back in the congregation?

SONIA MORTIMER: Yeah.

GRAHAM DAVIS: How do you feel about that?

SONIA MORTIMER: Angry, very hurt, because something so pure, someone so evil can be in that organisation.

GRAHAM DAVIS: This was a confession from a paedophile.

JOHN WYNGATE: That's right.

GRAHAM DAVIS: He confessed to it!

JOHN WYNGATE: Yes.

GRAHAM DAVIS: To abusing a 6-year-old.

JOHN WYNGATE: Yes.

GRAHAM DAVIS: And you disfellowshipped him, you banned him from the congregation for nine months.

JOHN WYNGATE: Yes.

GRAHAM DAVIS: And that was fair enough?

JOHN WYNGATE: No, well ...

GRAHAM DAVIS: Seriously.

JOHN WYNGATE: At the time we acted with the information we had.

GRAHAM DAVIS: The information you had was a confession that "I have abused this 6-year-old."

JOHN WYNGATE: That's right. His conduct, it was a one-off thing.

GRAHAM DAVIS: A one-off thing? With a 6-year-old? That's okay, is it?

JOHN WYNGATE: No, no, let me qualify my remarks. There was no evidence of sexual abuse of other children by this guy.

GRAHAM DAVIS: As we'll see, no evidence yet. That was to come. And, well, Dennis Evans was repentant.

JOHN WYNGATE: In a situation like that, you look for a person's remorse, and all of these qualities that go along with a request to be able to be allowed back into the Christian congregation.

GRAHAM DAVIS: But every paedophile is remorseful when he gets caught. That is the problem with paedophilia.

JOHN WYNGATE: It's all right for you to stand there and tell me all the facts.

GRAHAM DAVIS: But we know that he molested ...

JOHN WYNGATE: But you've never dealt with it, have you?

GRAHAM DAVIS: But we know he molested more girls than just Sonia.

JOHN WYNGATE: We do now, don't we?

GRAHAM DAVIS: We do.

JOHN WYNGATE: Yes, we do now.

GRAHAM DAVIS: Yes, Dennis Evans was also abusing this girl, when she was just 13.

'MARIE': I told my father and my mother what had happened and then my mother went to the congregation and asked the brothers what they were going to do about it. Then we had a meeting and he admitted what he had done and they just said not to talk about it to anybody and that they would deal with it.

GRAHAM DAVIS: And did they deal with it?

'MARIE': No. They haven't dealt with it.

GRAHAM DAVIS: It was only when 'Marie' and Sonia discovered years later they had both been molested that they finally decided to go to the police. Evans confessed all, was tried and convicted, but because he's partially blind, escaped a jail sentence.

SONIA MORTIMER: He said I could take it through the society or I could take it through the legal system. And what did I do? I had to take it through the legal system. I had to tell strangers, people, what had happened to me. How do you think that made me feel? How do you think that made me feel?

GRAHAM DAVIS: John, what are you going to do? What is the church going to do to help these people now because they are clearly in a state of trauma? What are you going to do about this, mate?

JOHN WYNGATE: Well, we will try ... It is up to those individuals, if they wish us to help them in some way, we are quite happy to do that.

GRAHAM DAVIS: You've offered spiritual help, in other words, bible readings. What they need is ...

JOHN WYNGATE: Not just bible readings.

GRAHAM DAVIS: What they need is counseling.

JOHN WYNGATE: If they choose to employ professional counselors to help them cope with their distress and their abuse ...

GRAHAM DAVIS: They can send you the bill?

JOHN WYNGATE: No, that is their choice.

GRAHAM DAVIS: As we've heard, Dennis Evans now attends this Kingdom Hall in the small Queensland town of Yarraman . Do you worry about the safety of the children in that congregation?

'MARIE': Yes, I do, and not only because he's there — if they've let him in there, who else is there as well?

GRAHAM DAVIS: Who else indeed? A two-witness standard of proof, derisory punishment, routine forgiveness for acts of contrition — the Jehovah's Witnesses are truly a magnet for paedophiles.

JAMES KERR: God is supposed to be someone of love. How is any of that love?

GRAHAM DAVIS: Wolves who prey on the lambs harboured and forgiven, lambs silenced, shunned and abandoned. And can you explain to me why they would favor a paedophile over somebody like yourself?

SONIA MORTIMER: No, I can't, because I don't know. It's like I'm the one that's done the wrong.

GRAHAM DAVIS: Is that how they've made you feel?

SONIA MORTIMER: Yeah, yep. I'm a victim, I'm not the perpetrator.

GRAHAM DAVIS: And do you think you did anything wrong?

SONIA MORTIMER: No. I just trusted.

GRAHAM DAVIS: So the lambs are sacrificed for the continuing good name of the sect. Those who go public pilloried, like the two who appeared in our last story, three years ago. Natalie Webb's father, Victor, was sent to jail for 10 years from having sex with her from the age of 4 until she was 17, yet, incredibly, some Jehovah's Witnesses directed their venom at her.

NATALIE WEBB: I was a liar, basically, and that God's organization wouldn't allow that to happen.

GRAHAM DAVIS: And while Robert Souter eventually received a 3-year jail sentence for abusing Simon Thomas and John Dingham, it wasn't the paedophile who was denounced by the circuit overseer, but the victims.

SIMON THOMAS: Basically a lot of lies that were told on the show and the people on the show were bordering on being apostate.

GRAHAM DAVIS: You?

SIMON THOMAS: Yes, me.

GRAHAM DAVIS: And an 'apostate' meaning?

SIMON THOMAS: A person who speaks out against God and the Holy Spirit.

GRAHAM DAVIS: We asked the self-appointed custodian of the truth, the Watchtower Society, to take part in our story and received this response, which included: "We make a strenuous effort to protect people from persons known to be guilty of sexual abuse." But tell that to the mother whose son continued to be abused while church elders knew all along, and didn't tell her. When the crime was finally exposed came the ultimate indignity that convinced the family to leave the church for good.

'LYN': Even though there was a restraining order, even though he had confessed to the police and he was waiting to go to court, he still came and sat right in front of us in the Kingdom Hall, and my son was just so traumatized by it we had to leave straight away.

GRAHAM DAVIS: As we've seen, the sect is now facing a fresh crisis over this woman's rape allegation against her father, the prominent elder. Given your father's senior position in the church, do you expect the rest of the hierarchy to believe you?

'JULIE': No.

GRAHAM DAVIS: You don't?

'JULIE': No. My father is very well-known within the church.

GRAHAM DAVIS: He has committed a crime against you.

'JULIE': Uh-huh.

GRAHAM DAVIS: Don't you think you should go to the police?

'JULIE': Possibly should, but I don't know if I could. When all is said and done, it is still my dad. Yes, it's destroyed me and I'll never get rid of that, but I don't know if I want to destroy the rest of my family.

GRAHAM DAVIS: But as this victim wrestles with her appalling dilemma, those who did go public three years ago seem to have found a certain peace that's always eluded them. When we last met Simon Thomas he showed us his paintings — tortured images of the pain he had endured. Are you still painting those kind of images?

SIMON THOMAS: No, I don't. I don't paint like that any more. That was a stage that helped me purge the feelings I had, and, no, I'm past that.

GRAHAM DAVIS: You felt empowered by showing your face?

SIMON THOMAS: Yes, I did. I did.

GRAHAM DAVIS: And Natalie Webb, the girl abused by her father. This was her three years ago.

NATALIE WEBB: My earliest memory is having a bath with my father and he was touching me. And from other things around me, I realized that I would have been about four.

GRAHAM DAVIS: And this is Natalie today. You look a lot happier.

NATALIE WEBB: I am, thank you.

GRAHAM DAVIS: Was it beneficial talking to us, do you think?

NATALIE WEBB: Very beneficial, yes.

GRAHAM DAVIS: In what sense?

NATALIE WEBB: I think it validated a lot of what I felt, but it also made me feel like I wasn't the only person who had been through it and I wasn't abnormal or demonic or any of those things.

GRAHAM DAVIS: Those we've met today have helped lift the veil higher on the darkest secrets of the Jehovah's Witnesses. But their journey towards closure is just beginning.

JOHN DINGHAM: You can't stop people from coming into these organizations, there's good and bad everywhere. But at least put something in place to try and make them think twice.

JAMES KERR: God is the god of love. How can a god of love allow anything like this to happen in his so-called organization here on earth?

SONIA MORTIMER: I'm not doing anything wrong. I'm just telling people what happened, putting it out there so other people don't get caught up in the same situation.