

Film sheds light on Jesus People's stories of abuse

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CHICAGO (RNS) When filmmaker Jaime Prater decided to make a documentary exploring the lives of the children he grew up with at the Jesus People USA religious community, he says, he never imagined his research would “open the floodgates.”

Stories poured out about sexual and physical abuse. More than a dozen adults who lived as children at Jesus People relate their stories in Prater's film, “No Place to Call Home,” which has been released on Vimeo on Demand.

Jesus People is one of the last remnants of the “Jesus movement” of the 1970s, which attracted earnest young urban missionaries seeking an alternative to the drug culture and free-love communes of the time. Today, Jesus People says it offers adults and families a chance to turn around their lives in an evangelical, Bible-based communal setting.

Two lawsuits have been filed against Jesus People in Cook County Circuit Court. The suits also name the Evangelical Covenant Church, headquartered outside of Chicago. Jesus People has been a member congregation of that church since 1989.

In one of the suits, Heather Kool, 38, of Athens, Ga., alleges she was repeatedly sexually abused as a child by a resident of the community while living there with her mother.

In a separate suit, filed on March 24, Prater, 38, alleges he too was sexually molested as a boy “over a period of years” by a different community resident.

Both suits say Jesus People and the Evangelical Covenant Church failed to protect minors, adequately supervise adults and minors, and implement policies to protect minors. The suit also cites the two organizations for failing to report allegations to police. Prater and Kool are each seeking \$100,000 in damages.

Ron Brown, one of the current pastors at Jesus People, declined to comment on the suits or film.

Phil Zisook, the attorney for Jesus People, said he is analyzing the allegations and plans to file responses in court.

Evangelical Covenant Church spokesman Edward Gilbreath said the church is “continuing to gather information” about the specific allegations against Jesus People. “We take these allegations seriously,” he said, “and our hearts ache over news of harm to children and the lingering pain felt by adult survivors of abuse.”

Gilbreath said member organizations operate as separate entities and are responsible for their own governance. However, they are expected to report allegations of abuse to authorities and to permanently “disqualify from ECC ministry” any clergy member found guilty of child molestation or abuse.

Both lawsuits say the alleged abuse stemmed in part from Jesus People's practice of letting families with minor children share living quarters with nonrelated adults. Prater says Jesus People would accept people into the commune with few questions asked. "The leadership engineered this environment of let's accept everyone into our doors. That's what set up this cocktail, this environment of cyclical sexual abuse," he says.

Jesus People's leadership discouraged reporting the abuse to authorities, assuring members instead that they would handle the problems internally, according to the filmmaker.

Prater says he could find evidence in only six cases that the leadership reported the abuse to authorities, "and then only under pressure from parents."

In only one case were charges ever filed. An individual from the community was prosecuted and ultimately jailed. It is unclear whether police found insufficient evidence to press charges in the five other cases or whether the families involved decided not to proceed.

About 450 people still live at Jesus People on Chicago's North Side. Families pool their salaries in exchange for food and housing. Jesus People runs several ministries that provide a variety of social services to senior citizens, the poor, and the homeless.

Jesus People also operates a roofing supply company in Chicago, where many of its residents work. For decades, it has sponsored the Cornerstone Music Festival, an international Christian rock concert held annually in the Chicago suburbs.

Andy Young, a licensed clinical professional counselor, says he went to the Chicago police late last year after hearing about the allegations from several former Jesus People residents. Police found that the criminal statute of limitations had expired on the cases brought to their attention.

Police also found no evidence of current abuse at the commune or that anyone at the commune is currently a threat to minors.

Micki Johnson of Aitkin, Minnesota, says parents at the commune were discouraged from speaking about personal problems with anyone but the leadership. This, she says, led to a "veil of silence and secrecy."

Johnson's son, now 38, says in Prater's film that he was sexually assaulted as a pre-teen by a fellow resident. Johnson says she later learned that her son's alleged attacker was living at Jesus People while on parole for a sex offense. He is currently listed in the Illinois archive of sex offenders.

Johnson says that when she and her husband asked the leadership council to remove the alleged abuser from the community, a council member "began screaming at me that my son was a well-known liar."

Johnson and her husband eventually agreed to have their son removed from the community and placed in a group home. She says she had "no idea" at the time that other parents were reporting separate instances of abuse. The family left in 1998.

"I'm speaking out now," Johnson says. "And I know there may be people full of condemnation and judgment for us as parents. But it is nothing compared to the condemnation we have for ourselves" for failing to speak out sooner, Johnson says.