

**Radio New Zealand
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Nine to Noon with Linda Clark

Linda Clark Interviewing Mavis van Dalen

Linda Clark ... [start missed] is a deaconess in the Presbyterian Church who once worked at this children's home. She's now supporting some of the complainants. I spoke to her before we came on air this morning - began by asking her when she first became aware of the claims of sexual abuse.

Mavis Van Dalen: There was a reunion organised for the children of the children's home to which I went, and I heard a comment from one young woman to another. And some months later I queried it with Kathleen who told me what had happened to her.

Linda Clark: This is Kathleen Batchelor who is one of the complainants who has made her name public.

Mavis Van Dalen: Yes. Yes.

Linda Clark: So when you heard the kind of passing reference, or comments, between two of these people -what was going through your mind?

Mavis Van Dalen: I thought it was an odd comment and that it didn't sound as if things were really nice or pleasant. And that's what made me a bit perturbed about it.

Linda Clark: So you were perturbed and unsettled?

Mavis Van Dalen: Yeah.

Linda Clark: You had previously worked at this home.

Mavis Van Dalen: Yes! Yes! Two great years of my life.

Linda Clark: Way back in the fifties?

Mavis Van Dalen: [laughs] Yes, way back then.

Linda Clark: But when you were at the home, this was in the days before Walter Lake, the man at the centre of all these allegations.

Mavis Van Dalen: That's correct.

Linda Clark: He wasn't at the home at the same time.

Mavis Van Dalen: I didn't ever meet him until the actual reunion, which was 1990.

Linda Clark: So when you worked at the home, did you see any child abused?

Mavis Van Dalen: Oh no - we had a wonderful superintendent. There was a couple who were cook and caretaker. No. It was a very happy home because of the matron. No. It was utterly delightful to me. Sometimes I've looked back and wished I'd stayed longer.

Linda Clark: When you then, many years later, heard about this, and then you talked to Kathleen about it, what did you think?

Mavis Van Dalen: I was horrified. Because of course I still related to my children who were all under seven. And to think this happened to children - the girls and that - and later I found out boys - yeah, I was a bit incredulous.

Linda Clark: Did you think that Kathleen was credible?

Mavis Van Dalen: Oh yes. I think when something like this - or any problem - people when telling you, you know that they're not making things up. I never ever doubted any. I don't doubt any that I hear lately either.

Linda Clark: Because since then you've gone on to meet some of the other complainants.

Mavis Van Dalen: Yes.

Linda Clark: And you're supporting them.

Mavis Van Dalen: Yes.

Linda Clark: At the time you first heard about this, did you raise the issue with anybody in the church?

Mavis Van Dalen: Ah, I did some months later. I contacted a minister whom I had trained with, and told him about it, and he said he needed to see a group of men in the church. And I actually rang three times because he moved up to Napier. And I felt until two days ago, actually, that he had done nothing, because I didn't hear anything. But - can I relate this quickly to you - I rang a hairdresser yesterday to make an appointment. She and her father were talking about the film on Saturday [Sunday] night,

and the father said, 'Oh he was a mate of mine, I know him. He was looking into that matter, he told me.' So you see, my assumption was wrong. But I can only go on what I'm told.

Linda Clark: But at the time, as far as you knew...

Mavis Van Dalen: Nothing had been done.

Linda Clark: In terms of any formal investigation.

Mavis Van Dalen: I didn't know of anything, all those years.

Linda Clark: What did you think of that?

Mavis Van Dalen: Ah, I think I got busy with married life and children, and just kept contact with Kathleen now and again to see she was okay, and didn't do anything. That's horrible now.

Linda Clark: Do you feel bad about that?

Mavis Van Dalen: Yeah, when I think of it.

Linda Clark: Well, what would you, what could you have done?

Mavis Van Dalen: Well I did know people in the church of course, having trained there. And I was a church member. I could have perhaps talked to them about it.

Linda Clark: Do you think that the church bears any responsibility for this?

Mavis Van Dalen: As far as I'm concerned they do. There is a difference between the Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Support Services.

Linda Clark: Well that's what Trevor Roberts said to us yesterday. That the two are not the same.

Mavis Van Dalen: Yeah, but at the same time people like Duncan that I spoke to was a member of the church, and to me if the people there talked about it they always go to the PSA and say - well this is what we've heard. I think many of the church people that knew, and I mean church members, then they could have done something.

Linda Clark: Do you think it's possible that other church members did know?

Mavis Van Dalen: Yes I do. I've actually read a letter, a copy of a letter, that a young woman wrote to St Andrews Church in Wellington, and nothing was done.

Linda Clark: Again, detailing...

Mavis Van Dalen: Yes. Well I don't know that there was specific details but definitely outlining what happened to her.

Linda Clark: Your support for - the fact that you're now supporting these complainants, or some of these complainants, how do other church members respond to that?

Mavis Van Dalen: I haven't talked to anyone about it. I don't know. I just don't know.

Linda Clark: Do you imagine it's seen as a good thing, or not such a good thing. I mean if you look at Trevor Roberts reaction to all of this. He says - look, we can't necessarily believe these complainants, that this is their word against a dead man's essentially, and that the abuse has far from been established, has far from been proved.

Mavis Van Dalen: I watched that programme and I just found that incredible. If you're a Christian, and I understand people in these top positions are basic Christians of the church.

Linda Clark: Well he's a member, Trevor Roberts is a member of the church.

Mavis Van Dalen: So you look into it to see if this rumour could be correct, and also what he's wanting. He's wanting private lives of people handed to him on a plate instead of talking to them. And I do know that Kathleen and a minister and two other people went in and they have put on tape what happened to them. And the promise was that they'd get a copy. Now that man says that Kathleen had a tape herself. That's correct, but it didn't work. So the office were going to give her a copy. And for nearly three years, two and a half years or so, they have been trying to get a copy of what they said in that interview and talk.

Linda Clark: And why do you think the Presbyterian Support Services doesn't want to give a copy of a tape of that first conversation?

Mavis Van Dalen: I have no idea. I suppose with all these business happened in other churches which has gone back for a while, perhaps it's having to face up to what people have done in the past, having to take responsibility now, right now and in the future, is something that they knew nothing about when they became church members.

Linda Clark: Well, also Trevor Roberts said yesterday, it's about protecting the assets of Presbyterian Support Service. They don't want to open themselves up to a massive compensation claim.

Mavis Van Dalen: We has to talk to people because, as far as I know, the majority of them don't, the ones I know, don't a massive compensation. They want an open thing - we're dreadfully sorry this happened to you. But he's trying to push it into court.

Linda Clark: So they just - so, an apology, some kind of apology would be enough, would it?

Mavis Van Dalen: Well I think it would to some. I just don't know about the rest.

Linda Clark: In the meantime, I mean I pick up my morning paper this morning, there's a Tom Scott cartoon which is about this, which paints the church and Presbyterian support in a very negative light.

Mavis Van Dalen: Right.

Linda Clark: What do you feel about that?

Mavis Van Dalen: Well I go back to my roots, Linda. I went all through Bible Class, leader and involved. I go back to it and I just can't get a grip on it, frankly. I can't understand why people can't just talk about it and sort it out. Especially when you know that for generations people who were assaulted - and I've learnt this, I didn't know it before - are affected. And there's all sorts of things go on. You know. They have to have counselling. They can't cope with things. Pressure would possibly lead to suicide and all sorts of things, because of what happened to them. And this goes down into - with their children, and even their grandchildren. And I've got that from a minister originally, and I've looked at it since. So people are affected.

Linda Clark: And the people you've met, the people you've supported, do you think they've been affected?

Mavis Van Dalen: Oh definitely.

Linda Clark: Damaged, do you think?

Mavis Van Dalen: Yes. I know one who - how many years later? - all these years later has been having counselling for years. And I'm meeting her and getting to know her children. And yes, it's very difficult. One left home

because she had been brought up by 'a sad mother'. Imagine how the woman felt when this daughter said that to her. 'I've been brought up with a sad mother. I need a break.' And the mother didn't realise of course, she was being a mother as far as she could. And she's a great person. I admire her.

Linda Clark: Is she sad?

Mavis Van Dalen: I haven't seen that. When I'm there she is brighter, I think. I don't think she's as sad as she used to be because now there's a bit of relief, isn't there, with being able to talk to someone about it, with Kathleen and the lawyer and whatever - or whoever, I should say.

Linda Clark: So if this goes to court, and it looks likely now, will you stick the distance, will you support these people through a court case?

Mavis Van Dalen: Oh definitely. Oh yes. I'm right behind them. I'm sorry. But I think this has been abominable. And it's by my church, my church people - whom I didn't know but they're still part of my church, and I feel very - oh gosh - possessive, I suppose about that. Oh yes. I'll be with them.

Linda Clark: That was Mavis Van Dalen who is a deaconess in the Presbyterian Church, speaking on behalf of the 14 complainants now identified. All were children of a children's home in Berhampore in the fifties and sixties and claim they were sexually abused while they were in the care of Presbyterian Support Services. More of that in coming days, I suspect.