

**Submission
No 81**

**INQUIRY INTO THE RECRUITMENT METHODS AND IMPACTS OF
CULTS AND ORGANISED FRINGE GROUPS**

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Submission to Victorian Government Inquiry into recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups

Submitted by: Laura McConnell Conti, as an individual cult survivor and as cult survivor advocate

Date: 27 June 2025

Regarding confidentiality: There are two clear parts to this submission. They are labelled 'Part 1' and 'Appendix / Part 2'.

I give permission for Part 1 to be made public, with no redactions necessary. Appendix / Part 2 I request to be kept confidential, with only committee members and secretariat staff to have access.

Part 1: Permission to be made public, no redaction necessary

Dear Committee:

Firstly, I want to commend you and thank you for holding this inquiry in the state of Victoria, as I recognise it is a bold step. Your consideration of cult and high control behaviour in this state is appreciated and commendable.

Background: I was born 5th generation into a secretive group which claims to have no name but is often known as Truth or 2x2s / two by twos.

I came from a rural and remote community, from a very large extended family. I had limited contact with people outside the Truth 2x2 community. While I attended public schools, I was discouraged from making and maintaining friendships with 'worldly people'. I was raised to believe that anyone outside the Truth 2x2s was going to hell, was not saved, was not worth my time and energy.

I was raised to believe the Truth 2x2s had the ONLY way to heaven, and that to leave the group would result in you not having access to heaven. I was raised to fear authorities, and to defer all issues to Elders and Workers. I experienced spiritual abuse, coercive control by my close extended family, pressure to conform to strict appearance requirements (not wearing trousers, not wearing anything which would be considered 'immodest – showing shoulders, cleavage, anything above the knee. Even wearing sandals was immodest – too much toe cleavage). I was not allowed to wear jewellery, cut or style my hair in modern styles. I experienced grooming and sexualised behaviour from as early as I can remember – somewhere around the age of 8 I first recall understanding the sexualised behaviour was occurring. Certainly by the age of 12, I was cognisant that I had to be careful around any of the men in my community and family.

I was raised to believe that unless you adhered to the Truth 2x2 strict, unwritten rules toward behaviour and appearance, you would go to hell, this is instilling fear and

indoctrination. I was raised to believe that if you left the Truth 2x2s a terrible accident would befall you. The levels of fear of the world outside the group is intense.

There was (and still is) social exclusion tactics used to ensure conformity, where people avoid anyone who leaves the group. Followers tend not to invite people who leave the group to family events or meals (or community events,. Remembering that our family and community are the same thing), they avoid contact and try to keep contact with a 'leaver' to a minimum.

Gender roles for girls and women are strongly policed – girls are valued predominantly for motherhood and marriage. Some women may enter 'The Work' (clergy) but their roles can never be as senior as men in The Work. Women Workers are also subservient to the men Workers. Women are rewarded for adhering to strict gender roles – having the most pristine home that Workers can visit, the best meals for Workers, the best behaved children in Meetings. To aim for something other than motherhood was considered strange, 'demonstrating the wrong spirit'.

I was pushed out of the Truth 2x2s when I was 19 years old, in 1999. Originally, I came from Bourke/Brewarrina/Nyngan area, moving to the NSW side of the border near Swan Hill when I was a teenager in the mid 1990's. I attended Meetings in Victoria – at homes and rented halls nearby Swan Hill, in villages such as Woorinen South, Nyah, Nyah West.

At the time I was pushed out of the group I was living in Melbourne. I had resisted a lot of the expected behaviours of girls in my community – like marrying young, having children, dropping out of formal education. I wanted to have an education, and I did not want to get married or have children. I always knew that I was queer/attracted to both men and women. I also had gender dysphoria and did not feel comfortable in the clothing required of girls/women inside Truth 2x2s. I pushed back on the tight gender and sexuality behaviours required of us. So, they pushed me out. They simply stopped talking to me, started acting like I did not exist. They would reverse out of the meeting rooms as fast as possible, to avoid me. They would say cruel things about my appearance, about my education.

Eventually they would even cross the street to avoid me, in the small community I came from.

Truth 2x2 followers (often referred to as 'Friends') will claim not to excommunicate or shun – however they practice it without naming it. Sometimes they will call it 'asked not to participate' where someone is told they have to sit out of meetings until Workers decide they're 'good enough' to return. They also have an informal practise of cutting off, silent treatment and avoidance of anyone who asks questions, demonstrates curiosity or challenges them. That's what happened to me – at 19- they cut me off, gave me silent treatment until I realised it was so uncomfortable that I could no longer attend.

The day I decided to never go back, because the silent treatment was so bad for my mental health – I thought I would then die. I spent 6 months believing that at any

moment, God would kill me and I'd go to hell, because I'd left. I was taught that people who left were destined for hell and that terrible tragedy befell them. Sadly, around the time I left, a relative was murdered while on holidays in Thailand. I was made to feel that it was an example of what could happen to you.

Around 6 months after leaving I managed to find some early internet chat rooms, and find other survivors, and information on the cultic nature of the group. That started my 26-year long journey with cult-survivor advocacy. I went on to support others leaving high control groups (not only the Truth 2x2s – but also JW's and PBCC).

I am a cult survivor advocate, a role I fell into accidentally, as I spoke publicly and became a touch point for other survivors to find information and support on the group. Due to the secretive nature of the group, there was very little information available online, and the information I put online allowed ex and current Truth 2x2s in Australia to find me. In Australia the group was known as 'The Truth' (the 2x2 bit is recent, out of US). Googling 'The Truth' doesn't get you target information on the group, its too vague a term – so it was difficult until recently for survivors to connect with each other. I became an advocate because I couldn't stay quiet about the kinds of abuses and control I was hearing about, and that I had also experienced myself. [REDACTED]

Impact on my life:

I have CPTSD as a result of both abuse inside the group and the difficulties of leaving and rebuilding. There is a lot of shame when you're from a cult – you hide parts of yourself to avoid being made fun of or used as trauma porn. There is sadly a lot of mocking of cult survivors by mainstream society, and a lot of misunderstanding about who cult survivors are and what cults look like.

I live with chronic pain as a result of trauma. I have had stints inside mental health facilities due to suicidal ideation. I live (most days) with passive suicidality.

I live with eating disorders and body dysphoria.

I have no functional relationships with my extended family. Remembering, I grew up in a large community and family. I was raised in intergenerational communities – surrounded by family. To have none of that as an adult has been devastating and traumatic.

I have experienced doxing, having threatening notes left on my car, having my car tyres let down. I have had threatening emails, abusive text messages. People still inside cults can be vindictive and abusive when they feel their power is being challenged. People who leave cults can also be damaged – and in the case of several of my family members who also left in subsequent decades after me– they're so damaged by their experiences that they lash out and threaten defamation for instance, when I speak publicly.

I have been threatened with physical harm by the family of people I have assisted, including threats to harm me, my child and my pets. As a result I have to be

hypervigilant about my physical safety, and I rarely allow people I'm not close to, to know where I live. I have security systems and alarms installed. Due to the nature of my career my work address is easily found online. I am also hypervigilant at work about security and access.

In the process of submitting to this inquiry I have experienced flare ups in the abuse, including online comments which are intimidatory and distressing. [REDACTED]

I have a very limited support structure (as do many cult survivors) which leaves me vulnerable. I have no practical supports like child minding, housekeeping, emotional support which many people get from their family. I have been vulnerable to exploitative and manipulative relationships (see confidential appendix) If we don't have strong support structures, we can be taken advantage of more easily.

I have watched Truth 2x2 women who leave the group get into relationships with coercive and controlling men, I have watched them repeat a lot of the same abusive patterns which occurred in Truth 2x2s because we have no template for doing relationships or parenting any differently. Cult survivor counselling is difficult and expensive to obtain. There is no known publicly funded cult survivor services that I am aware of in Australia (or Victoria).

I feel very privileged to have been able to fight for higher education, and to have had a career as a CFO, before founding my own brand in 2018/2019. **My story is not common.** I am high functioning; despite the levels of trauma I have survived and continue to have inflicted on me. Many of the women around me did not get the opportunities and health outcomes I have. Many survivors live with CPTSD which limits their health outcomes, their career and work options. Autoimmune, chronic pain and cognitive issues are antidotally an issue in survivors I've interacted with.

I believe there is a disproportionate number of people who've left the group with dissociative disorders. Dissociation, numbing (with addictions including drugs, alcohol, sex and extreme porn addictions) is a trauma coping mechanism which I hear about regularly.

Group Background:

The Truth 2x2s (two by twos) are often known by other names such as non-denominational Christians, The Way, The Friends and Workers, The Fellowship.

The believe themselves to have been started on the shores of Galilee, by Jesus. The true origins of the group are a tightly held secret, and followers are not told that the group was started in the late 1890s by a man named William Irvine. They believe they are descended from Jesus. Many of the followers have been 'in' so many generations that its difficult for us to challenge this idea that they came from Galilee. The Truth 2x2s have a homeless ministry – called Workers (what other groups would call preachers). Workers travel from home to home, in pairs of the same gender, and live with followers (called Friends).

They do not have registrations – no known church entities. No formal registered name or entity. No charity status. All donations are made in cash, Elders are expected to give Workers cash donations. There are family trusts which hold assets and cash – all held in the name of wealthy and Truth 2x2 Elders. None of the Workers are holding these trusts in their own names. The fact these trusts are with influential families (Elders) makes them unable to be accessed to pay compensation to those of us abused in the group, through schemes such as the redress scheme set up from the Royal Commission into Institutional Abuse.

There are no known employee or volunteer records, which makes taking legal action against the leaders very difficult. I have tried to take legal action for abuses in my childhood but cannot find enough records to prove that the Workers were in a position of power, in my community at various dates.

The lack of governance structures, legal entities and records makes holding the group accountable impossible at the moment.

The group has a website they released in response to pressure put on them about endemic CSA, which has no legal entity which sits behind it, and no indexation for SEO, no name mentioned. The website lists a load of child safe policies, which they claim mean they're a 'safe' church. They refer followers to that webpage whenever they're asked questions about safety.

That website is disingenuous – if any of those policies are broken, not followed – there are no legal consequences or avenues someone could take. No legal entity underpins it.

There is no written doctrine, it is a spoken word doctrine – you need to hear from Workers (clergy) to interpret and understand the ideology. Meetings (services) are held in living rooms of followers, where a whole community will congregate together in a home each Wednesday night and Sunday. There are some bigger meetings held in rented halls.

Workers and Elders (the oldest man in a community usually) are deferred to for solving all issues and giving advice.

There are believed to be around 2,500 Friends (Truth 2x2 followers) in Australia at present, although as there are no records, this is difficult to quantify. There is between 700-1000 followers in Victoria presently.

There was believed to be around 15,000 followers in Australia in the mid 1990's, before a large exodus occurred (the internet.... people found out that Workers had lied to them about the origins). What was left after that exodus in the late 1990s was a much more hard core, devout group/cult.

The group is world-wide, with followings in places such as: US, Canada, UK, Ireland, France, Italy, Greece, South Africa, South America, Vietnam, Malaysia, India, China, East Timor, NZ, Fiji and Solomon Islands.

The current Overseer (Head Worker) in Victoria is believed to be [REDACTED].

The current Overseer of NSW (who is also believed to be overseer of Australia) is [REDACTED].

Previous Overseers of Victoria, recently include: 1990's: [REDACTED]. 2000's: [REDACTED].

Previous Overseers of Australia, recently include: 1990's and 2000s: [REDACTED]. 2010 to 2020's: [REDACTED].

Examples of abusive, coercive controlling and disingenuous behaviour in Truth 2x2s:

- Plausible deniability (DARVO essentially) by not having any written doctrine, rules or regulations. The goal posts are constantly moving and everything can be denied if nothing is written down
- Denial of the groups origins – they deny that the group was started by William Irvine, instead telling followers that it is ‘the only church not started by a man and therefore is the only true way’ – telling followers it was started by Jesus.
- No entities or structures – no employee records, no accountability. You can hold anyone to account
- Divorce and remarriage is forbidden. This traps people (mostly women) in abusive marriages which they cannot leave, or they will be ‘asked not to participate’ (informal shunning)
- Fear of authorities and world outside the group – a strong ‘us v’s them’ culture. This discourages reporting to agencies, police. It keeps problems ‘in house’ and allows abusive behaviour to be swept under the carpet.
- LGBTQIA+ are not welcome. We are told we ‘Cannot participate’ and are slowly pushed out of the group because we don’t ‘have the right spirit’.
- **Appearance control** – particularly in women. Women must not cut their hair or wear it in a stylish manner. This includes no obvious hair dye. Women must not wear make-up, jewellery (other than a simple watch and wedding band), must not pierce their ears, or have tattoos. Women must not wear trousers and must always wear modest dresses and skirts. There is a strong modesty culture, where women must cover up – including shoulders and cleavage.
- Women and girls are discouraged from careers (other than in some feminised industries) as it gets in the way of marriage, children, keeping house, being available for Workers.
- Swearing, gambling, drinking alcohol and fraternising outside the group is discouraged. We are told to keep ourselves separate, to keep interactions with ‘worldly’ people to a minimum

- People who leave are framed as ‘broken’ ‘having lost God’ ‘having walked into sin’ having ‘chosen sin’. We are framed as troublemakers, dissidents, vexatious when we raise concerns about safety of people in the group.
- Financial abuse is rife within family groups. Very few people inside can identify that it is happening to them. It’s expected that you will give cash to Workers
- Sexual abuse is rife, both CSA and SA within marriages. Very few people raise it or can do anything about it. When they try, they’re told to ‘forgive and forget’ or that they ‘need to be more submissive’.
- Emotional manipulation and abuse of children is normalised – children are told they are a reflection of the spirit of their parents, that they ‘reflect badly’ on their parents if they don’t behave in accordance with the group’s expectations. Women in particular abuse children, as its often the only power they get within the group. I have numerous examples of women threatening suicide if their children want to leave the group, want to pursue education, or push back on a marriage.
- Fear of hell is constant. You can be pushed out of the group for asking questions, and your family and friends will cross the street to avoid you. People will tolerate all kinds of abusive behaviour, because to say something means you risk being cast out, and believing you’ll go to hell outside the group.
- Shutting down of critical thinking. Controlling and numbing the followers – not allowing them to ask questions without shaming them, accusing them of ‘not having enough faith’ or ‘the right spirit’. Shame is used by Workers, Elders and parents to shut down any questions, any independent thought.
- They believe they are the ‘one true way’ – all other beliefs are ‘false’ and worshiping ‘false idols’. They have no space for pluralism, for questioning or curiosity. If you do - you risk being removed or shamed.
- Information Control – followers are discouraged from reading too widely, consuming materials online. TV, radio, pop music, movies are taboo. Many do now have laptops and mobile phones, but they are very selective about what content they consume. They’re told that you ‘can’t believe anything you read online’ and that ‘the devil puts information online to deceive people’.
- Followers are discouraged from building connections - hobbies and friendships outside the group. It is seen as taking you away from Christ, interfering with your relationship with god, to have outside interests. You are expected to put all your time and energy into the Truth 2x2 community and family group.
- Workers (clergy) are untrained, uneducated. They learn by following an older Worker of the same gender. They have no educational standards, no theological training, no pastoral care training, no safety training. They are not required to

have working with children checks, criminal checks or follow child/vulnerable people laws. This is because they are 'house guests' or relatives, and not employees or volunteers of any organisation or registered group. Often they are related to us – our Workers are often our Uncles, Aunts, or 2nd, 3rd Aunt or Uncle.

- The group uses a Pentecostal bible study insurance policy (which is apparently available to anyone who holds a bible study in the home) to access public liability insurance, when hiring public halls. They do hold some meetings in rented public facilities. They are deliberately circumventing registrations and insurance requirements by accessing this policy.

Ways I have tried to hold them accountable/seek justice:

1. **Royal Commission into institutional sexual abuse.** The Workers (clergy) refused to engage in the process around this for around 4 years, then after considerable pressure internally, they indicated they would sign up to the redress scheme. Its impossible for them to sign up as they have no registered legal entity and they refuse to register one. Overseers and Workers are aware of that – they know that they can't be held accountable or have to pay compensation.

They deregistered the one entity they did have in Victoria (albeit it one with no assets in it) just before the royal commission findings were made public. That entity was called 'Christian Conventions of Victoria'. It never held any assets (from what I can tell) and was used on letterheads and visa applications for Workers wishing to prothletise overseas.

Eventually the government will pay my redress on their behalf as the funder-of-last-resort, because they claim not to have any entities and ability to pay. This is disingenuous. They still take cash donations from their followers and are rumoured to have millions in family trusts. Government funds should not be used to pay me redress, for abuse which occurred inside this group/cult. They have the capacity to pay, they're choosing not to.

2. **Civil and Criminal action** – with no registered entities and no employee records it has been impossible for me to take legal action through the civil or criminal courts over the abuse and grooming I experienced by Workers. Two of these Workers are now deceased, so any action would have to be against an organisation – which does not exist. Even proving that one of them (who is still alive) was in a position of authority when he groomed me, has been impossible. There is no paperwork available to me to back up the fact he had been a Worker in the area I was in.
3. **Coercive Control Legislation in NSW** – I sought legal advice about taking certain 'leaders' (Workers) to court in NSW under the coercive control laws which came in on 01 July 2024. I was advised that it only applied to domestic and intimate relationships. Workers live in our homes, influence our families from

within our homes. However their behaviour is not captured by this legislation in NSW.

Impacts of Truth 2x2s on my life

I experience health impacts which I observe to be common in other 2x2 survivors

- CPTSD
- Chronic Pain
- Anxiety
- Hypervigilance
- Digestive disorders
- Dissociative disorders
- Disordered eating

I came out of the group with little identity or understanding of myself or the world around me. The relationship models around me were abusive and disrupted:

- Us v's them view of the world I'd been ensconced in left me scared of new connections, with few hobbies, interests or idea who I was or what I liked/disliked
- I sometimes answered to my sister's name – I sometimes couldn't tell when I started and stopped, and where my siblings started and stopped. There was a deep enmeshment
- I felt a disproportionate responsibility for my siblings. I was parentified and used as a pseudo-parent
- I believe that I did a terrible job of protecting my siblings, that my parenting style with them was replicating what I saw around me – controlling and coercive.
- I did not have a solid attachment with either of my parents – the attachment being disrupted by their devoutness to their belief structure. Everyone else (including their children and their children's safety) came second to their belief structure. This disrupted attachment results in relational trauma.
- I had no template for functional parenting and sought out to parenting support in order to ensure that I parent my own child differently. I am not the primary carer of my child because I don't believe that I would be a great parent for him. My belief in my parenting ability is impacted by my upbringing and early parentification.

Economic impacts

- I experienced housing insecurity and poverty after leaving the group. This is an experience I see replicated in other rural, regional and remote Truth 2x2 young leavers.
- I have had stints in private mental health facilities, which have been very expensive. If I did not have the career I do, and the financial security – this would not have been possible for me. I see other leavers who need this access to high quality mental health facilities, in order to be assessed and be prescribed

appropriate medication – and they cannot afford this. These are people who distrust mainstream services, and when they go to a public hospital and are not well triaged – they lose even more trust in structures and authorities.

- My ill health (physical and phycological) impacts my ability to work and my income. It limits the kind of work and the hours I can work.

Recommendations and considerations for this committee of Inquiry:

Recommendations:

I would like all groups, regardless of the kind (religious and non-religious) to be safe places, with clear accountability structures. I would like anyone in a group to be aware that they can safely leave and get support if that group turns out to be a cult/high demand group.

- I recommend funding for awareness and education programs so that people are aware of unsafe, coercive cults – and therefore avoid them. I recommend an ongoing public-health-style campaign in the media talking about safe and unsafe group behaviours.
- I recommend funding for agencies to support cult leavers and cult survivors – so that the work is well supported and funded – rather than being done pro-bono by survivor advocates like me.
- I recommend training in high schools, the same way safe relationships are taught – safe group behaviour can be taught
- I recommend training for health care professionals - doctors, nurses, counsellors- in identifying someone in/from a high control group, and how to sensitively support them. This training should also focus on health impacts of cult members/survivors – the way mental health is impacted, the specific issues around physical health – chronic pain and auto immune issues as examples.
- I recommend a way to define what a cult is. What are the behaviours which indicate a group is high control? I'd like definitions to refer to. There is a spectrum of behaviours in my opinion, which are coercive. I would like to see this spectrum outlined and publicly available for people to use to determine if they're in or joining a safe group.
- I recommend Centrelink, DV agencies be trained in identifying and supporting cult survivors and cult members. At present there is no cult-specific funding for housing, for leaving, for creating safety. Many cult survivors take decades to talk about their experiences – agencies need to be able to help survivors develop vocabulary, find safe housing, settle and build new lives.
- I recommend Centrelink benefits be made available to cult survivors from the age of 16, instead of needing to prove independence from family until the age of 21 (22?).
- I recommend training for police and teachers– in how to identify and interact with cult members and cult survivors. How to have safe conversations with people inside high control groups.

- I recommend a redress scheme be established for cult survivors, accessible by cult leavers (a cult being defined by a set of coercive group behaviours) to help them build new lives, deal with medical, educational and housing issues.
- I recommend that name suppressions and gag orders be examined, and the misuse of them to cover up for cults and endemic abuse in cults be considered when making them. When name suppressions and gag orders are used, it helps cults hide systemic patterns of abuse by leaders and members.
- I recommend funding for research into cults and high control/demand groups be made available, to provide more context and data on how cults impact Victorians.

Considerations for the committee

- How can coercive group behaviour be examined and held to account, when a group does not have any formal registrations or governance structures? What kind of legislation would be needed to facilitate that – to ensure that Truth 2x2s (and others from secretive and underground cults) are able to take legal action if they entity has no ABN, no registered charity, no organisational details.

Is there a way groups who act and behave like an organised group, but which are unregistered, can be held to the same standard as a registered group in law? How could that work in both criminal and civil cases, where no legal entities or assets exist?

- How can cult survivor advocates be better supported, and fast? I see burn out, vicarious trauma, CPTSD flare ups – the work of cult activism and change is falling onto the shoulders of already damaged and exhausted people, with no funding or resourcing. We need urgent support for survivor advocates – funding, counselling, support services and research.
- How can legislation be carefully crafted to ensure it does not unfairly criminalise women in cultic environments. Women are often the enforcers of culture in high control groups – policing children’s behaviour and appearance. Women are often highly involved in marriages and match making and involved in what could be considered coercive marriages. With no written doctrine, no registrations or leadership structure formally documented – women in a family/community could become an easier person to prosecute than an Elder or Worker under group coercive control legislation.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]