

**Submission
No 159**

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

Name: Name withheld

Date Received: 27 July 2025

Name
withheld

I request that my name NOT be included in any public records of the inquiry

I am submitting this to the inquiry as a member of a high control religious group commonly known as 2 x 2's. My parents, grandparents and great-grandparents belonged to this group, so I was born into this high-control religious group. I was a member of the ministry of this group from from my early 20's for over 25 years. I still participate in this group in a limited capacity. My experiences have been in Queensland, but this group operates in all states of Australia. I want to share my experiences to help people to understand the experiences of people in coercive religious groups, help protect others from the harm that I and others have experienced and also to make suggestions about ways that people can be supported to leave and build lives outside a coercive group.

In this group, general members experience a level of coercion and control. However, for many who become a member of the ministry, the coercion and control are much higher. The experiences of people in this group are very complex. It seems from my observations that many people have experienced many forms of family trauma, sometimes for many generations. This has made these people vulnerable to abuse and coercion and also at the same time caused many people within the group to perpetrate this same abuse and coercion on others. I mention this because it is important to understand that people who are victims of coercive control are often perpetrators of the same coercion. It is a very complex dynamic.

I was not recruited into this group as I was born into this group. This is the experience of the majority of members. However other people have been recruited to the group by responding to an invitation by a friend or through the newspaper to attend a gospel service. As far as I see it, this group doesn't really use deceptive recruitment as anyone who is invited to a service, knows they are going to a religious service.

I was born into the 2x2's so my whole world view has been formed and coloured by the culture, beliefs and behaviour of the group. We were encouraged to believe that that the preacher's words were divinely inspired so questioning or disagreeing with their statements and teaching was usually considered to be speaking against God. Many preachers and believers believed and taught that the group was directly descended from the early disciples. Luke 10 v 1 (Jesus sent the ministry 2 and 2) is a central tenet of the faith group. This group believes that the ministers should be homeless, unpaid and move continually. Preachers and many believers believed and taught that members of this group were the only people who were truly obeying God. Not everyone in the group believes and teaches these things but it is a common belief. This is a very controlling and manipulative teaching because when people are questioning abusive behaviour in the faith group or considering leaving, they are afraid to speak up or to leave because they have been taught that leaving means they are "leaving God's true way." And therefore that they will go to hell. When people do leave the group, preachers and others in the group will often make very negative statements about them. The result of this is that people who are considering leaving are afraid to leave because of what will be said about them. Some of these statements include "they didn't really have faith." "they just want to do worldly things." "they have lost their salvation" "they are going to a lost eternity" "things will go badly in their lives now," "they have turned away from God." These opinions carry a lot of weight with people because they have been taught that the opinions of the preacher are the words of God. Sometimes in this group, people will shun those who have left. Part of this is because people who are still in the group are discouraged from being close friends with those who have left in case it affects their own faith and causes them to leave also. Part of it is an idea that, if people are shunned it will cause the ones who have left to turn from the "wrong" they have done.

Generally in the 2x2 group, people are discouraged from having close friendships with people outside the group. A lot of teaching within the group, encourages members to think of people outside the group as “worldly,” “unsaved,” “evil.” There is a large continuum of practices and beliefs about this topic in the group. Some of us, grew up with many friends outside the group. Some people have no friends outside the group. When people have few friendships outside the group, they are not exposed to different ideas to the ones held by the group. This limits people’s opportunities to assess what are “normal” social interactions and limits peoples critical thinking skills. It also means that people’s entire social and family life is within the group so if a person is considering leaving, they have a very limited support network outside the group.

In the past, the group has preached against having TV, listening to the radio or even reading books. This limits a person’s personal growth and limits their world view and critical thinking skills. Some of that preaching is possibly done less these days but beliefs still prevail in the group, that members should not listen to sermons by preachers from other church groups, read religious literature from other groups and limit the self help or psychology type books they read.

Women are discouraged from wearing “immodest” clothing and criticised for wearing trousers, jewellery, make up and having short hair. None of these rules are written down as they are in some groups. Instead, there are a lot of “unwritten rules” about these things. People who break these unwritten rules may be openly criticized for doing so, or there may be preaching happen about these matters.

Some of the “rules” or expectation of “acceptable behaviour” within the group are different within different areas or different families within the group. One of the reasons for this is that some preachers in the group have different expectations and if they have spent longer in particular districts, their ideas may be enforced more strictly than others.

I had many years in the ministry of this group. I felt that was a calling for me but now I’m feeling that my personality caused me to be suggestible to preaching that encouraged young people to go into the ministry. In this group, the requirement for people going in the ministry is to give away all assets and savings and leave their career. Each person who begins is paired with an older co-worker This is unpaid work. Ministers received small gifts/donations from believers in the group. In Australia, the ministers usually stay in the homes of believers. Sometimes just for a night or 2, other times for a bit longer before moving on to stay in another home. Some of the co-workers are very kind and others can be very manipulative and abusive. The teaching of this group is that you must have respect for and be obedient to your co-worker. This teaching has allowed a lot of abusive behaviour to go un-checked. For myself and others, when we have spoken to other members about abusive behaviour we have suffered, we have been encouraged to put up with that behaviour and told to “keep a right spirit”. I have suffered verbal abuse, belittling, bullying and silent treatment. This group does not support or provide formal workplace education and there are no formal ways to report abusive or bad behaviour. In fact, myself and some others who supported having some education about bullying and communication and who spoke up to a senior minister about some of the abuse we faced, have been removed from the ministry.

Generally ministers have no choice about which districts they are allocated to or which co-workers they are placed with. These decisions are made by the senior male ministers.

I was in the ministry for over 25 years and then I became unwell with severe depression, anxiety and exhaustion. As I worked with my medical team to get well again, I came to understand that

my health issues were created and exacerbated by the extremely toxic environment in which I had been living and working. I had been in that environment for so long, I hardly understood that it was toxic and harmful. Because I had been living in those dynamics for so long, they felt normal.

I thought that I could get well and then go back into that ministry and encourage others to learn healthier ways to behave and live. As my health improved, I began to take some steps into being back in the ministry. My experience of managing a mental health challenge was dismissed and minimised by the older male minister who was responsible for allocating ministers to districts. I realised that my health would quickly deteriorate again in a system where the senior ministers had no understanding of the human needs of others, so I felt I was left with no option but to leave the ministry.

All of those years, in an unpaid role with an unregistered organization meant that I had very few transferable job skills. Thankfully my family has been supportive of me and have provided a place for me to live. Coming out of the ministry of a group like this means that a person has nowhere to live, no job, no income. Because the work is unpaid, the only superannuation, a person has is what was contributed before they started in this ministry.

In the ministry, we had been conditioned to believe that the ministry was our whole identity. Leaving the ministry, causes a person to feel that they have no worth and no identity. I have faced very large mental health challenges as a result of my time in the ministry, including depression, anxiety, PTSD symptoms including nightmares, suicidal thoughts.

It is very hard for a person who is the victim of coercive control to recognise coercive control until they have removed themselves from the person or institution who is controlling them. As time goes on, I see that many choices I made that seemed to be free-will choices were actually choices that I was coerced into making. Some choices that I made were made because other choices had been taken away from me. There is a danger that medical staff, government and banking agencies do not recognise coercion because the victim themselves is saying that they are not being coerced. The challenge is that when people and institutions are skilled at using coercive control and manipulation, the victim is unaware that what they experience is coercion. The victim thinks they are making a choice and they do not recognise that they are manipulated and coerced into making a particular choice.

I feel concerned about my future financially as I have no assets and the only savings I have is what I have been able to save in the 2 years since I left the ministry.

One thing that causes people to join a cult or high control religion and that makes it hard for people to leave these groups is a lack of community. I feel that it is important for governments and local governments to fund and support a variety of free and low cost community groups and activities like concerts, craft and hobby groups, community theatre, libraries, art galleries, parenting groups, sporting groups. These groups and places can support people to build community support and relationships and therefore make them less vulnerable to joining coercive groups and also support people who are trying to find healthy communities after leaving unhealthy coercive groups. These kinds of community groups are also helpful and supportive for people who are not part of high control religions but are trying to leave other coercive relationships.

There does need to be more education about coercive control. Those (like me) who have grown up in a high control religion, don't understand what coercive control is because it has been such

a large part of our upbringing and community that we think it is “normal”. I do feel that in providing education about coercion, it is important to be aware that the use of the word “cult” can alienate some people. In some situations, it is better to use the term “high control religion.” Most people who are in a cult will not recognise it as a cult and even after people leave, they will often not recognise it as a cult. The challenge with this, is that when community groups or government bodies are offering “help for cult survivors,” some people will not access those resources because they do not see themselves as being in a cult.

Something that was a very big help to me after leaving the ministry was to be able to do a fee-free tafe course. I did a certificate III course in disability support work which is the career I am now in. The course I did was on campus. On many levels this was so helpful to me. Sitting in class, with classmates from a variety of backgrounds was a very useful experience to help me learn about what other people’s lives looked like and how they functioned. When a person has lived in a group that encourages limited interactions with people outside the group, it can be really hard to know how to behave in general society. A certificate course include subjects which cover topics of ethics, law, mental health, diversity and inclusion and human rights All of these concepts are so helpful to a person who has been forced to have a really limited world view. I think that it is very important that survivors of coercive control have the opportunity of affordable education. This supports healing from the mental and emotional abuse of the coercive control. Education also gives people a way to find a job and earn an income. This support is needed not only by people who have left coercive groups but also people who have been in coercive relationships and who have had their educational opportunities taken away from them.

People who have left coercive groups can be at high risk of homelessness. In my situation, shelter was provided by the group while I was in the ministry. Once I was forced to leave the ministry, the group no longer considers themselves responsible to provide shelter. The ministry work has been unpaid so the person leaving has no money. I am fortunate to have family who allow me to live with them. Some people do not have family or friends who can provide housing. Many people are at risk of homelessness and there needs to be government support to ensure that people who are victims of coercive groups can have a safe place to live while they build their lives outside the coercive group.

For people, who have left (or are in process of leaving) coercive control groups, there needs to be more subsidized mental health support than what there presently is. People who leave high control groups have many mental health issues to sort through. Their whole world view has been shaped and controlled by the group. For those who have been born into these groups, it means that they have never had an identity outside the group so it takes a lot of mental health support to work through all those things.

I feel that Centrelink staff and medical staff need to be more educated about Coercive control. I am so grateful for people who have been supportive and have helped me to negotiate the very complex journey to finding ways to manage when there was so much that I didn’t understand about how government agencies, banking and other systems worked. I also know that others in similar situations to myself have not received the same understanding and support that I have experienced.

I hope the submissions made to this enquiry can provide government and community groups with a deep and broad understanding of the myriad ways that being in a coercive group damages peoples relationships, mental health and financial wellbeing and that there can be

ways found to support people to identify coercive behaviour and not be trapped by it. I also hope there can be ways found to support people trying to learn to live outside of coercive groups.