

**Submission
No 184**

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

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Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry Submission

Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups

Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee

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1. Introduction

I am submitting to this inquiry as a survivor of a high-control religious group, known by ex-members and the media as the “2x2’s”. The group claims to have no official name. The group exists worldwide and has a strong following in Victoria. I am a woman who was born and raised in this group and entered its ministry at age 27. I left the ministry and the group at age 37. I want to share my experiences of what it is like to be born and raised in a high-control group and the indoctrination that led to joining the ministry. The 2x2 ministry is like a cult within a cult, or its very inner circle. I will also share my experiences of coercive control within the ministry and the harm it has caused. I want to share my experiences to raise awareness, and to facilitate safe exit pathways for those who are trapped within coercive systems.

2. Recruitment Tactics

I was born and raised in the 2x2’s and attended meetings 2-3 times per week for all my early life. The beliefs of this group idolise and worship the ministry, who are known as “workers”. To be a “worker” in the ministry was the highest and most honourable calling and they are treated as the voice of God and the highest authority. As children, we either looked up to them and adored them, or were terrified of them. From about the age of 12, adults in my family said things to me like “you will be a worker one day”. This planted a seed in my young mind that never left me. Throughout my teens and early 20’s, I had multiple experiences of sitting in meetings and being encouraged to join the ministry. Over time, I internalised these beliefs and started to be consumed by thoughts of joining the ministry. They were so intense and intrusive that I could not ignore them. At the time, I believed this was a “calling from God”. We were taught, that if the voice of God calls you, or asks something of you, then you must obey it. If you don’t, your life will go badly, and you will lose God’s

favour and go to hell. By my mid-20's when other career pathways were not progressing well, I finally decided to join the ministry. This choice was seen as a free choice.

The hierarchy of the ministry is gendered, with men always ruling over women. Each state has an older male worker called an "overseer" who is assigned responsibility to make the decisions for all the workers in their state. Workers are required to be celibate, have no assets, be homeless, take no wage, salary, or government support, and rely solely on infrequent and unsolicited cash donations from members. Small cash amounts are gifted to them by members that sustain a limited amount of personal needs such as clothing and toiletries. It is believed that once you join the ministry, all your needs will be taken care of. It is not known how this will happen, but it is believed that if you have faith, there will be no lack. Each year, the state overseer assigns workers to an area or "field", in same-sex pairs (co-workers) where they work for a period. They are housed and fed by the members of the group and they move frequently between member's homes, sometimes only staying 2-3 nights in each home. Each pair of workers will hire a local hall and conduct public gospel meetings at least twice a week, as well as attend meetings in the designated homes of selected members.

I joined the ministry and became a worker at age 27. I was immediately love bombed by many members and other workers. Offering one's life as a worker and taking a vow of poverty to "preach the gospel" is seen as the greatest sacrifice one can make. A young life who is willing to "sacrifice all" is often cited as the evidence that the 2x2's have the power of God with them and therefore they are the one and only right way to eternal life. As a child, I experienced emotional neglect, as well as physical and sexual abuse and often felt alone and isolated throughout my early life. Consequently, when I joined the ministry, it felt wonderful to be valued and part of this very special group of God's servants. I felt like I finally belonged to a safe and loving family who I could trust and who would support me without question.

3. Manipulation and Control

Once I joined the ministry, I discovered that it was not safe, and it was not loving. The standards and lifestyle we had to maintain were exhausting and physically debilitating. The younger workers, particularly the women, were subject to bullying and harassment, as well as psychological and spiritual manipulation and abuse. When I tried to raise concerns about the bullying and harassment in the ministry, it resulted in more bullying and harassment from others. The behaviours included manipulation tactics, gaslighting, silencing, withdrawal, and liberties being taken away or more burden being placed on you. Perpetrators were often moved to another area or given greater privileges. Victims were encouraged to stay silent, be obedient, have a loving spirit, find forgiveness and have joy in suffering.

We were expected to be available 24/7, 365 days a year. We often moved house every 2-3 days and often shared a room with our co-worker. We had no personal space or time to ourselves. Towards the end of the year, we would gather for a convention on a farm where our members would join us

for 4 days. The ministry would stay on the farm for 6-8 weeks prior preparing for the event. During this time, we would sleep in a dorm with 4-8 other women. There was never any time alone. We would wake up early, work all day cooking, cleaning and preparing for the convention. Most days we would work 18-hour days with little rest. Everyone was always exhausted. We were not allowed to leave the premises unless we had permission and were accompanied by someone.

There was a strict dress code (long skirts, sleeves to or below the elbow, high necklines, no make-up, hair in a bun). Any deviation from this resulted in being pulled aside and reprimanded. We could be accused of trying to be seductive or immodest. Our clothes had to be practical and limited to one or two small suitcases, as we always carried all our personal belongings with us. Standing out through any kind of self-expression was not encouraged, so we all mostly wore the same kind of clothes. Exercise for women in the ministry was discouraged, because it required wearing pants, which were forbidden.

We were discouraged from having close contact with family and friends. Close friendships were strongly discouraged and frowned upon. Being well-liked by members of the group would result in being treated with contempt from co-workers, so I learned to keep my distance from anyone. While I was working in a field abroad, my brother died tragically at a young age. I was allowed to return to Australia for 10 days for the funeral, before being sent back to the foreign field. During the months of grief that followed, I was told by the overseer to “cut ties with my family and press into my faith more deeply” so I could recover from the grief more quickly. This resulted in extreme psychological distress.

All choices about what we did, where we went, and who we saw were made by the overseer or our older co-worker. The younger women in the ministry had zero autonomy or choice. We had no access to transport, or money, and were under constant supervision by our co-worker or members of the group. We had very little access to the outside world and lived in a bubble of isolation. If we did not want to go along or agree with plans that were made for us, we were seen as unwilling or disobedient to God. While in the homes of members, we had to eat whatever they put in front of us, even if we did not like it or it did not make us feel well. This often led to being forced to eat more than we needed, as we would have multiple visits in a day.

While working abroad, there were widespread terrorist attacks on international hotels and churches in the country I was working in. The terrorists were targeting foreigners and Christians. During that time, I felt very unsafe and started to experience symptoms of PTSD. However, it was decided by the overseer that we would remain in the country. We also stayed there during the outbreak of COVID and remained isolated in a small village without access to medical care.

At one point, during the floods, I was staying in the home of a divorced man and his second wife. Their relationship was not acceptable according to the group’s beliefs. Their place was flooded badly, and I was told by the overseer that this was an act of God because I should not be staying in that home. I also had a car accident in my brother’s car and was told that this was an act of God because I should not be driving my brother’s car.

Overall, it was the belief of the group that suffering was good for us, and it was a tool that God used to bring us closer to him and make us perfect. This belief was used to justify the unliveable conditions that we endured as well as the abusive and controlling behaviour of senior workers. They were seen as the voice of God, so we could never question their decision making. If we questioned, it felt like a direct disobedience to God himself. This resulted in extreme spiritual torment.

4. Impacts

I began to experience regular suicidal thoughts from the first year I joined the ministry. Over the next 10 years, I also experienced chronic migraines, reproductive health issues, anaemia, as well as depression and anxiety.

Towards the end, while working abroad, I became so unwell that I could not eat. I developed a severe eating disorder, as well as experiencing psychotic episodes that nearly took my life. A friend and doctor who recognised how unwell I was, with great effort was able to convince the leadership that I should return to Australia. I had developed multiple physical illnesses which required several major surgeries. At this point, the ministry and senior members withdrew all financial support and told me that I needed to “get a job or Centrelink”. I was dismissed from my role and left destitute with no financial support from the group. The overseer also discouraged members from supporting me. I had worked for 10 years with no salary or superannuation and had no savings.

Since leaving, I have had to rebuild my life financially from nothing while trying to recover from the physical and mental illnesses that I have developed. I still experience PTSD, C-PTSD, suicidal ideation, chronic exhaustion and migraines. I experienced a period of homelessness and continued housing insecurity. I need ongoing therapy and medical appointments which places significant financial burden on myself and the healthcare system.

The group has shunned me. I experienced a loss of identity and loss of community. I have had to reestablish relationships with my family and friends that had been severed by the controls of the ministry. It is very difficult to trust myself or to trust anyone else. This makes it difficult to rebuild any kind of community and reintegrate into society. I struggle in relationships with others and have a deep pervading sense that I am a bad person.

I have been taught since the moment I was born that I am a sinner and destined for hell without the salvation of God obtained by following a certain set of rules. I was taught never to question, and this limited the development of my critical thinking skills. I am still trying to deconstruct these beliefs.

5. Recommendations

1. Government-funded research and development of recovery programs to support people to leave high-control groups.
2. Government support that exists for victim/survivors of family and domestic violence be extended to survivors of high control groups. This would include crisis payments through Services Australia.
3. Investigation into informal organisational structures and financial records of groups that operate under a religious context.
4. Legal accountability for religious leaders
5. Education and training for doctors and therapists to recognise the signs of coercive control in group settings.

Closing statement:

I hope this inquiry increases government and public awareness about the harms of high control groups and brings to light the experiences of an invisible population of survivors who are suffering with very limited and almost non-existent support.