

**Submission
No 201**

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

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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 writing this submission to share my experience of growing up inside the “2x2’s” religion. This is high control religion which states that they have no name, however ex members and media often refer to them as the “2x2’s” and the “Truth” and on formal documentation they have also been known as “Christian Conventions of Victoria.” I was born into this group and then went into the “work” (ministry) at age 26. The “work” is a cult within a cult. I was there for 13 years when I left both the religion and the “work” in 2023. I was fourth generation in my family to belong to this religion.

I want to share my experience inside the “work” and how we are recruited into this ministry as this is a perspective that is not often represented of those who have left the religion. The inner workings are often hidden from the congregation and from the public eye. This inner circle is a harmful place to exist, and it causes both emotional and psychological harm and trauma from time spent in the ministry.

2. Recruitment Tactics

I would like to share specifically about how we are recruited into the “work” of this 2x2s religion. I was born inside this religion. My great grandparents on both of my parent’s sides originally accepted this religion by leaving mainstream religion within Victoria. The congregation generally attends a gospel meeting in their district or area 2 times a week. These meetings are generally held in a rented hall or school building. It is generally an hour meeting which is run by the two “workers” in the area. The meeting usually runs for an hour with each worker speaking for half an hour each. This meeting is open for both the congregation and the public to attend. It is expected that those who are part of the existing congregation to attend and listen to the teachings/doctrine of the 2x2’s. Those who belong to the congregation also meet twice a week in someone’s home to have “fellowship.” This is run by an elder, which is a man within the congregation who’s home the fellowship meeting is usually held in. This is a time for the congregation to share from the Bible. It usually goes for one hour and has a very set structure of hymns, prayer and sharing.

In the public “Gospel meetings” the workers would preach about the ministry and how they were sent out two by two as Jesus taught in the Bible. They would preach of this calling being the highest calling. They would speak about leaving mother and father, your career, your country and giving your life for your whole life, to bring the Gospel of Jesus to souls throughout the world. They would speak of the struggle within a person to go into the work and then the peace that came when they surrendered. This is the message I have heard from birth.

We would also attend a yearly convention at the end of the year. This would be held on a farm that is generally owned by one of the members of the congregation. The convention was only open to members, however the evenings meetings were open to the public to attend. The workers run these 4-day conventions and speak for the majority of each two hour meeting. There is also time in these meetings of about half an hour for the congregation to share their testimony. There would be workers from overseas at these events and they would often speak of the call into the work and the need for labourers. There would be stories of offering to go into the ministry or abroad and work in a foreign country.

In reflection these stories were always told in a “romantic and mystical” way. The struggle was explained as part of the story, and it meant you were called. They spoke of signs and hearing a call. They spoke with such conviction you believed that all doubts about your calling would be gone when you surrendered.

I was twenty when I first began to feel this “call” into the work. A good friend of mine went into the “work” when I was at university. It was from this time that I began to think more about the “work.” Then I went to Canada in 2007 and I began to hear the call strongly. In every gospel meeting, convention and gathering with group members it was spoken of this need for the ministry, and I began to believe this was a sign.

Once I returned home, I offered for the work, even though I always had other plans for my life. We were taught that we had to obey the voice of God or that we would risk being sent to Hell. I believed this was a normal response. When I told my parents, who were also in the religion about me offering to go into the “work,” my dad was not happy about this. He struggled from the beginning about my choice. My dad had concerns about me giving my life to the ministry. However, I knew that I could not let anything stop me from following “God’s calling.”

I eventually started in the ministry in 2010. I left my career as a teacher and all my plans and became a “worker.” I worked throughout Queensland in different towns and cities for 6 years.

In July 2016 I went to Kazakhstan to work in the ministry and remained there until March 2022. I had 6 months at home at the end of 2019 for a break. During my time in Kazakhstan, I spent time in Russia also. As Kazakhstan is a Muslim country, we would enter the country under the guise of being “English teachers.” To enter Russia, we would buy “work visas” from business fronts. One of my visas had me employed by an Electrical company. Going into Russia was a very stressful experience due to concerns about being questioned about why you were entering the country and who you worked for. Some of my coworkers had been stopped in the past at the airports and taken in and questioned for hours about what they were really doing in Russia. Some had a black mark against their name and were sent back out of Russia after these interviews. Some workers were taken to police stations and questioned through the night for the activities they were participating in Russia. In Russia it was illegal to have gatherings in the home or teach the Bible unless affiliated to a mainstream religion.

During covid I was isolated alone in a small village in Kazakhstan where the medical help was limited. I had a lot of fear around what would happen to me if I became unwell with Covid due to the lack of good medical help. In 2021 we got caught in political unrest in Almaty city where over 200 people were killed. We were isolated in our homes while there was a shoot to kill order for people leaving their homes as the military regained control of the country. The internet was turned off for a week by the Government and we had no access to money as all ATM machines didn't work due to no internet. We were unable to make any contact with people outside of the country or get access to any news other than local radio. I returned home with PTSD and bad anxiety from these major experiences I went through.

In reflection I can see that I was vulnerable to this calling into the work as I had a deep need to care for people and to belong due to my upbringing. I was a very caring and empathetic person, and it felt like it made perfect sense to give my life for others. I was prepared to even lose my health for this calling. They offered purpose for my life. As this calling is meant to be for “life” it takes the stress of the future away. It also takes away the everyday stresses that people face. Being in the work also fed my ego and made me feel loved and like I belonged. You are loved by the congregation and often idolised and worshiped. You are love bombed in the beginning when you start in the ministry. However, as time goes this ends.

Inside the ministry there is a very structured system. At the top are usually older white men who are called “overseers” who take care of every state in Australia. Women are to be subject to the men and younger women must be subject to older women. Everyone in the work is paired with the same sex co-worker and sent two together to different regions and towns within each state and throughout the world. They are usually paired an older co-worker with a young co-worker. To go into the ministry, you need to forgo marriage and relationships, career, wage and super, choice and autonomy. You make no decisions for yourself, as all those decisions are made for you by the overseer of the state. You live in the homes of the church members. The congregation usually donate a car which you use in your field. The congregation house you, feed you and support you with unsolicited cash donations. These donations are used to pay for halls, fuel and any personal needs that you might have, including toiletries and clothing. When you enter the ministry, you are told that your needs will be met and that you will be taken care of. You are taught that if you become unwell or elderly, you will be taken care of. At the “Convention” workers are assigned a co-worker and a “field” to which you will go to and work in the area for about a year. When the workers go to their field, they live in the member's homes. They usually stay 2-3 nights to a week at a time in each home. When in the homes of the congregation you eat the meals with the family and keep that family's schedule. During the day you would visit the elderly in nursing homes, those who are sick or dying in hospitals and visit the congregation for morning tea, lunch, afternoon tea and dinner. Then you prepare for two gospel meetings a week at least. Sometimes some co-workers have more than two gospel meetings in one day or in a week. Preparing for these meetings would involve spending time reading your Bible and praying to prepare a message for the meeting.

3. Manipulation and Control

The ministry uses tactics of manipulation, coercion and control on the staff. Bullying and harassment is rife amongst co-workers and those inside the ministry. Spiritual and psychological abuse are common amongst one another.

Once you are in the ministry you no longer have control or autonomy over your life. All choices are taken from you. In Australia you are often never alone or allowed to go out alone without your co-worker. You are not trusted to be left alone. This is especially so for the women. Men are given more lenience. You become isolated from the realities of life including the cost of living and real-life responsibilities. You have very little money and must ask for money from the overseer if you need it for any big medical expense including glasses, dentistry work or operations. There is a constant busyness which means that you are never still or quiet for long. Being in the ministry requires you to be available 24/7 every day of the year. This causes an exhaustion that leads to numerous physical and emotional health issues. This exhaustion also means that you have less time to “think” for yourself. The constant moving and busyness causes many of the workers to have sleep issues.

One of the manipulation tactics is to never give you the opportunity to say no to choices made for you. If you did say no, you would be seen as being unwilling. Overseers would often use words like "I prayed about it," when explaining why a certain thing would be happening in your life. For example, when I was in Kazakhstan, I was never asked by the overseer if I wanted to become a resident of Kazakhstan. This decision was made by the overseer. This process took over a year of highly stressful paperwork, medical appointments and intense interviews with Government officials which all took place in the Russian language. I would be in these interviews with a co-worker interpreting for me. I never understood what was going on as I didn't yet speak the language. I had no voice or choice in the decision that were made for me. If I did raise questions to the overseer, he would say this was the best decision and I was strongly encouraged to "fit in" with the plans. The overseers decide who they sent you with and where they sent you in the state, Australia or the world.

The ministry discourages any psychological help or the reading of "self-help" books. Psychology is demonised and seen as the destroyers of marriage and faith because it makes you question things. You are also discouraged from having any close friends in the ministry, especially with the opposite sex. You become disconnected from your family and only get to spend time with them for a few weeks each year. You are taught to distance yourself from them and not rely on them for anything. In the ministry you are taught to put "Jesus first, other's next and yourself last." This teaches you to override any feelings, desires or thoughts you might have about anything. You learn not to "trust" or "take care" of yourself.

Inside the ministry there is also an expectation of how to dress and present yourself. Women are to dress "modestly" with a certain length sleeves and skirts. Women are never to wear pants or jewellery. Women are meant to have long hair and always wear it up. The men are to wear long pants and would never been seen wearing shorts. Men are to have short hair and often discouraged from having any facial hair. Women are taught not to question the men and that you must always obey. When you are young in the ministry you are taught that you should keep silent and you are discouraged from sharing any experiences that you had prior to the ministry and especially any experiences you had out in the "world." You are not to get close to any of the members in the congregation. You are not to have any sexual desires or needs and are taught to dismiss or squash these thoughts.

4. Impacts on You or Others

During my time inside the ministry, I suffered insomnia, depression and anxiety and shame around my sexuality. I also suffered bullying and harassment from co-workers over my years in the ministry. During my time overseas I feared for my life which left me in a constant state of fear and exacerbated the anxiety. After the political unrest I returned home with PTSD around loud noises and sirens. Once I returned home, I began to get medical and psychological support for my health conditions. I was told by the overseers that it was okay to "rest" and that my medical appointments would be paid for. I had to keep all my medical receipts from my medical appointments and give them to the man from the congregation who controls the money. I would have to explain what medical appointments I was getting to receive the financial support. There was no privacy around our medical needs. My parents supported me by letting me live with them and they provided for my everyday needs. Then after 9 months there was a change of overseer in Queensland and Victoria, and the new overseer told me and another woman who was "resting" that we were to get a job or Centrelink. This was a very traumatic experience to be told that you were not worth taking care of. This was the opposite of what we had been told in the beginning, when we were reassured that they would support us to get well. From that moment all financial support stopped. This experience disrupted trust in the word of the overseers, as they did not follow through on what they had originally promised.

Since leaving the group I struggle with anxiety, PTSD, flashbacks, nightmares and depression. I have been left financially vulnerable as I have lost 15 years of my earning life inside the ministry with no income or super. I have had to rely on family for a place to live. I have had to learn about who I am as a person and try and form a new identity without the church. I have had to learn to make decisions which is very difficult when you never had choices. I have a constant fear of being abandoned and deep feeling of rejection. I fear meeting people who are still inside the church due to their shunning of me and their judgement and harsh criticisms since leaving. I hold beliefs that I am unlovable, flawed and bad and something is deeply wrong with me. I become emotionally reactive easily and struggle to hear any kind of criticism. I hold very black and white thinking and struggle to think critically about things. I also have a deep fear of losing my job as this has been a very real experience.

There have also been impacts on my family and friends. My parents were excommunicated from the church for standing up for me when I was abandoned by the church when I was unwell. Other friends that spoke up for me were also excommunicated for being vocal about the abuse and lack of care and support when I was most needed it. When I shared publicly about how I had been treated, the congregation also abandoned me and stopped communicating with me. I was told by different co-workers that the "Devil had a clutch of my soul" and that "the overseer didn't really mean that," when I explained about him asking me to get a job or Centrelink. I lost all my social support within the church once leaving the church and publicly sharing my experience.

5. Recommendations

- Support groups or foundations for people exiting cults/high control religions etc that can help people navigate systems and agencies that offer support to reestablish your life. E.g. similar to the supports for victims of crime and domestic violence.
- Government crisis payments/funding for cult survivors.
- Public awareness and language around cults and cohesive control within cults.
- Accountability and audits of all religions/groups around finances, abuse, reporting etc.
- Training and specialist support agencies and training for doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists and other health professionals around religious trauma.

6. Closing Statement

I hope this inquiry leads to the government and public awareness about coercion inside cults and religious organisations. I hope that it begins to create a language around behaviours and start to name things that are pervasive and harmful within these groups. I also hope that peoples lived experiences could be used in a meaningful way to help bring change at a government level to keep more people safe. Lastly, I hope that this inquiry can put into place support for those leaving cults.