

**Submission
No 12**

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

Name: Barbara Maccarrone

Date Received: 2 May 2025

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

Terms of Reference:

- Methods used to recruit
- Methods used to control their members
- The impacts of coercive control

Methods Used to Recruit:

I was born into the Jehovah's Witnesses in Spain in July 1975—the year they predicted Armageddon. While my mother was pregnant, Jehovah's Witnesses knocked on my parents' door. They used fear-based messaging to recruit: warning of imminent destruction for those who did not worship Jehovah. This appealed to my mother's maternal instincts, pressuring her to protect her unborn child. Simultaneously, the religion's patriarchal structure resonated with my father's narcissistic and domineering tendencies. By December 1976, when my younger brother was born, my parents were already baptised Jehovah's Witnesses. Their conversion—from a Catholic background to full commitment—took less than two years. That rapid shift speaks to the intensity and manipulation of their recruitment tactics.

Methods Used to Control:

One of the most powerful methods of control used by Jehovah's Witnesses is the promise of everlasting life in a paradise Earth—but only for those who are baptised and obedient. At 14, I was told during a family book study that because I was now “old enough to know right from wrong,” if Armageddon came and I wasn't baptised, I would be destroyed along with the wicked. The message was clear: baptism was my only chance at survival. I soon got baptised—not out of personal conviction, but out of fear.

Baptism, however, came with strict conditions. Any “serious sin”—ranging from smoking to premarital sex, even in cases of rape—could result in disfellowshipping. This meant being excommunicated and completely shunned by all Jehovah's Witnesses, including one's own family. By that time, we were living in Australia with no extended family nearby. Our entire social circle consisted of other Witnesses. We were discouraged from having friendships with “worldly” people, and only interacted with them when absolutely necessary, such as at school or work. This created a closed environment of total control, where compliance was essential to retain any sense of community or connection.

Impacts of Coercive Control:

The coercive control within Jehovah's Witnesses had significant and lasting impacts on my life. I left home at 17 because I could no longer cope with the oppressive environment. This forced me to leave school early, as I couldn't afford to continue my education on my own. I had aspired to become a lawyer—a profession that is discouraged within the religion unless you're working on behalf of the organisation. The irony was not lost on me.

Later, I married someone outside the religion, which led to judgment and further social exclusion from the Jehovah's Witness community. I tried to stay connected to the religion—at least outwardly—so I wouldn't be cut off from my family. But it became increasingly difficult as my personal beliefs began to diverge. Things came to a head when one of my brothers was disfellowshipped for smoking. I refused to shun him and actively challenged my other siblings and their spouses for excluding him from family events. In turn, they began to shun me.

Following the 2015 Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse—where Jehovah's Witnesses were heavily criticised—I felt compelled to speak up. I knew of multiple cases involving ex-Witnesses who had experienced sexual abuse and later died by suicide. Around that time, I supported a woman in my congregation who was in a custody dispute with her estranged husband, also a Jehovah's Witness, who was suspected of sexually abusing their children. When one of the children sought help while in his care, I went to his home to check on the child. He refused access, so I persisted until he called the police and obtained a 12-month intervention order against me. During that year, I stopped attending meetings and faded out of the religion entirely.

The social consequences were devastating. I was fully shunned by my family and anyone from the congregations who knew me. Years later, I discovered that another of my brothers had been disfellowshipped because he is gay. He, too, was shunned by our family and the community. We have since reconnected.

The impact of this coercive system is lifelong: it fractures families, isolates individuals, and punishes autonomy. The psychological and social toll continues well beyond leaving the religion.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission. I am willing to be contacted for further information or to provide testimony if required.

Sincerely,
Barbara Raquel Maccarrone

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