


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

**Name:** Name withheld

**Date Received:** 27 June 2025

Name  
withheld



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**TO:**  
**The Committee Members of the Inquiry into the Influence**  
**of Religious or Other Ideological Organisations**  
Victorian Parliament

Dear Inquiry Committee Members,

I am writing to share my experience of growing up a Jehovah's Witness and provide testimony to the Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups. I write because I have lived through the psychological and emotional damage this 'religion' causes to its members, and I believe my story can help protect others, especially children, from similar harm.

My name is [REDACTED]. I was born in [REDACTED], NSW. I come from a multigenerational Jehovah's Witness family. Jehovah's Witnesses recruited my paternal grandmother on her honeymoon in the 1950s, and she is now [REDACTED] years old and remains a devout Jehovah's Witness. My father was raised in the religion and is now [REDACTED] years old. My mother was raised Catholic, but converted at age 18 when she met my father. Together they had two children, my sister, now [REDACTED] years old, who is still a Jehovah's Witness, and me, now [REDACTED] years old and no longer a member.

Like all Jehovah's Witness children, I was subjected to indoctrination from birth. The Jehovah's Witness organisation promotes the "inculcation" of children - a term they use proudly, which literally means to instill an idea by persistent instruction. This is not simply religious education - it is systematic conditioning. Their literature, which includes children's books, parenting manuals, and visual aids, is carefully crafted to instill unquestioning obedience from an early age.

The core message drilled into me as a child was that the world was going to end - soon - and the only way to survive was to remain loyal and obedient to the Jehovah's Witness religion. They believe they are the only true religion on Earth, and all others are part of a corrupt, Satanic system destined for destruction at Armageddon. I was taught that if I disobeyed, questioned doctrine, or left the religion, I would die at Armageddon - along with billions of people, including my classmates, neighbours, and even family members who weren't Jehovah's witnesses.

This apocalyptic worldview was not just a background belief - it shaped every part of my childhood. It controlled what I was allowed to read, watch, celebrate, or even say. I was forbidden from participating in birthdays, holidays, national events, school social events, and after-school activities. Friendships outside of the religion were heavily judged and discouraged, and viewed with suspicion. I was taught that the world was under Satan's control and the only way to remain safe was to be fully enveloped by the Jehovah's Witness religion. That meant limiting contact with the outside world.

Fear, guilt, and obligation were tools they used rampantly to control my life. During the three meetings per week I attended growing up, I was repeatedly reminded of the upcoming destruction of mankind and how I would be destroyed too if I failed to be obedient in even the

smallest of ways. I was taught that if I didn't participate in door-to-door preaching, I would be blood-guilty for people's deaths at Armageddon - their blood would be on my hands for not saving them through conversion. This created an overwhelming burden of responsibility, especially as a child. They taught me that I was sinful, worthless, and undeserving of kindness and that I was obligated to serve God by obediently following the Jehovah's Witness organisation.

The teaching of Jehovah's Witnesses didn't just influence my thoughts - they also infiltrated my dreams, my nervous system, and my sense of safety in the world. From a young age, I suffered recurring nightmares rooted in the graphic and violent imagery used by the Jehovah's Witnesses to instill fear and obedience.

I vividly remember nightmares in which government agents raided my home, dragging my family away in the middle of the night because they were Jehovah's Witnesses. In other dreams, I was separated from my parents and left behind in a burning city, convinced I had failed God and was facing eternal destruction. These were not random childhood fears but rather were the direct result of the teachings I was exposed to in their children's books, videos, meetings, and even conversations within my congregation.

Jehovah's Witnesses, including children, are frequently exposed to imagery and descriptions of violent persecution, arrests, and the end of the world. Scenes of buildings collapsing, people screaming, and families hiding in fear while angels execute non-believers were presented, not as metaphors, but as literal prophecies that would be fulfilled in my future. We were told these things would happen any day.

This constant exposure had a damaging effect on my developing brain. I developed generalized anxiety disorder, clinical depression, and social anxiety disorder. Even as an adult, my nervous system is in a near-constant state of survival mode. Simple tasks like socializing, working, and relaxing can trigger panic attacks, dread, or a deep sense of unease. These are the long-term effects of sustained religious trauma during childhood.

What I have described so far is what *all* Jehovah's Witness children are subjected to. We all grow up in an environment of fear and conditional love. However, I happen to be gay, also, which in that environment adds a deeper, more devastating layer of trauma.

From about the age of 6, I realized that I was different from other boys, although I didn't yet have the language to name it. What I did know was that whatever that difference was, it was dangerous. Jehovah's Witnesses teach that homosexuality was not just wrong, it was "detestable" in God's eyes. It was repeatedly likened to acts worthy of destruction, lumped together with immorality, filth, and rebellion. I was taught that people like me were not only sinful but also a threat to others, to the purity of the congregation, and an affront to God himself.

There was no space in the world for someone like me to exist with dignity or safety. The only acceptable path was complete suppression. Jehovah's Witness doctrine doesn't just condemn same-sex relationships, it condemns same-sex orientation. Even thoughts or feelings were considered dangerous. I was indoctrinated to battle against these 'inclinations' through prayer, study, and obedience. Any slip-up, even a sexual thought, was considered giving in to the devil and could lead to discipline or disfellowshipping (this term has recently been rebranded as 'removal', but it remains the same - excommunication and shunning by all Jehovah's Witnesses, including family).

When I began to develop the language for what I was, I started researching the extensive online library of publications written exclusively by Jehovah's Witnesses for Jehovah's Witnesses. This is the only approved source of research. Everything I read there frightened me and confirmed

how dangerous it was for me. I needed to keep this part of me a secret to survive. During my research, I came across a book written for adolescents called “Questions Young People Ask - Answers That Work”. In this book, it said that people like me (gay) grow out of this homosexual “phase” by the end of puberty and that my main priority should be to ensure I don’t give in to my “urges”. I was thirteen years old at the time, and out of fear of failing to follow this direction, I convinced my parents to withdraw me from high school to complete my education through distance education at home. I thought I was protecting myself from “temptation” and “Satanic influence.” Really, I was isolating myself and limiting my ability to develop socially and academically, and my world became smaller and smaller.

I lived in constant fear. I monitored my every word, every gesture, and every facial expression I made. I became hypervigilant, terrified someone would notice, report me to the elders or my parents would kick me out of my home. I withdrew from social interactions and became unable to develop any friendships. Jehovah’s Witnesses warned against associating with people who seemed effeminate or “struggled with same-sex attraction.” It was made clear that people like me were to be rejected.

I held out hope that by the end of puberty, I would be “normal” and my life would course correct. In the meantime, I was very lonely and felt completely trapped. I learned to hate my body for its “sinful tendencies,” and over time, that self-loathing turned inward. I learned to hate myself for not meeting the religion’s idea of “perfect.” Depression set in for years. But I couldn’t get help - Jehovah’s Witnesses discouraged therapy, warning that it opens a door for Satan to manipulate your mind and lead you away from the religion.

By the time I turned 23, I experienced a suicidal breakdown. The sexual orientation I had been told was a phase hadn’t gone away. The psychological toll of suppression was immense. I had grown up believing I was inherently defective, that my capacity to love, something that most people celebrate and cherish, was something that I must be ashamed of, hide, reject, and repentant for. I saw no future for me. I couldn’t imagine living like this, alone, hiding, and shameful for the rest of my life. And due to the teachings, there was no alternative. I felt I had no way out, and so suicide seemed like the only way to end the pain.

I imagined driving my car into a concrete overpass so many times that I became afraid I would actually do it. An uncle, who was not a Jehovah’s Witness, encouraged me to seek professional help for my depression. With enormous fear and skepticism, I visited a psychologist. I didn’t reveal that I was gay, and I was careful not to mention anything about Jehovah’s Witnesses. I had been conditioned to protect the organisation’s reputation, even at personal cost (something that Jehovah’s Witness child abuse victims and their parents are also conditioned to do). Failure to disclose all of the factors was not helpful to my psychologist as she tried to treat me; however, she did manage to provide some cognitive behavioral therapy techniques that helped pull me out of suicidal ideation.

In response to feeling slightly better, I tried to earn forgiveness and acceptance from God for being gay. I signed up to spend 70 hours per month preaching door-to-door for the Jehovah’s Witnesses, unpaid. I resolved to do anything in my power to make up for my pitiful existence. I did this for two years until my depression got so bad that I couldn’t sustain it. My depression made it nearly impossible to leave the house.

At one point, an elder from my congregation approached me and told me that I “should be doing more” preaching. I told him that I was profoundly depressed and suicidal again. His response was the standard script the religion provides to elders: pray more, study the Bible more, read the publications, preach more. Not once did he recommend medical help or acknowledge the seriousness of my mental health. Instead, the solution was to further immerse myself in the system that was actively harming me.

Eventually, I returned to therapy. I couldn't bring myself to reveal that I was gay, but I started sharing small details about problems I was having in my family and congregation. For the first time, I was introduced to the concept of autonomy, which meant I had the right to my own thoughts, feelings, and choices. That idea took root. It sparked a slow-burning interest in mental health, psychology, and how human relationships are meant to function.

I began to notice that many of the teachings and practices within the Jehovah's Witness religion directly contradicted everything I was learning about mental health and development. That made me pause. If this religion claimed to be from god, why were its teachings the opposite of what was known to support good mental health?

I became stuck, caught between two worlds. I couldn't return to "fully active" Jehovah's Witness life, but I was still convinced leaving was wrong. For several years, I existed in a state of limbo. I was miserable and becoming increasingly frustrated as I continued attending the Jehovah's Witness meetings.

In 2021, three things happened in quick succession that changed everything. First, my dog died. As I grieved that loss, I reflected on how much of my own life I had lost by simply existing in survival mode. Second, I turned down a promotion at my workplace - not because I wasn't capable, but because the weight of suppressing my identity had made me too anxious and exhausted to cope with any additional pressure. And third, I watched a TV show featuring a gay relationship. For the first time, I saw something tender, honest, and beautiful reflected back at me, and I realized I was giving up everything I wanted and needed by obediently following the Jehovah's Witness religion. I wasn't living. I wasn't progressing. And I wasn't allowed to love.

I was faced with three choices:

1. Do nothing different, be miserable, unfulfilled, and die alone.
2. End my life to end the emptiness, unhappiness, and shame.
3. Leave the Jehovah's Witnesses and attempt to build a life that might give me some temporary happiness before being destroyed at armageddon for being unfaithful.

I chose to try to build a better life, even though it would likely mean losing everyone I knew from my past, including my family. That decision did change everything.

I started researching what I had been taught using outside resources (something that Jehovah's Witness leaders expressly forbid). I found evidence that refuted almost everything Jehovah's Witnesses had taught me.

I read the book "Combating Cult Mind Control" by Steven Hassan, a book written by a former cult member who has become a cult psychology expert. His scientific explanations for how cults recruit, coerce, and control people explained my entire life experience down to the last detail. I wept uncontrollably as I read each chapter. He described the exact techniques I had been subjected to: behaviour control, information control, thought control, and emotional coercion, as well as fear-based obedience.

Reading that book changed how I thought about my life, which is vital because many Jehovah's Witnesses who do leave are still indoctrinated by the core beliefs, living in existential fear, shame, and guilt. I no longer saw myself as a failed Jehovah's Witness who was doing the wrong thing by leaving. Instead, I realized that since birth, I had been coerced into handing over my autonomy, identity, self-expression, and voice. Leaving wasn't a case of failure on my part; it was me reclaiming what the Jehovah's Witnesses had taken from me.

I couldn't just walk away and forget everyone still inside. My parents, sister, nieces, and grandmother were all trapped and didn't even realise it. I felt a responsibility to try to help them see what I had seen.

I began asking questions, sharing observations, and introducing ideas that might prompt critical thinking. But my efforts were met with immediate and intense resistance. My parents shut down. They became defensive and angry. They interpreted this as though I were attacking them.

What I now understand is that Jehovah's Witnesses - like many cults - precondition their members to reject anything that challenges their beliefs, especially if it comes from a former member. The religion teaches that those who leave are mentally diseased, spiritually dangerous, and under Satan's control. This teaching creates an automatic mental barrier: anything I say is dismissed, not because it's false, but because I'm saying it.

This is how the trap works. Jehovah's Witnesses preemptively inoculate members against doubt. They label any critical thought as a sign of spiritual weakness or a lack of faith. They demonise external information - calling it "apostate lies" - and train members to shut it out without even considering it. The result is a closed loop: members believe they are free to choose their faith but have been systematically stripped of the tools they would need to question it.

I wasn't trying to attack their beliefs. I was trying to offer them the same freedom I had finally found. But they couldn't and wouldn't hear it. Not because they didn't love me, but because the programming of the religion had convinced them that listening to me could jeopardize their salvation.

This is what makes the Jehovah's Witness cult so difficult to leave. Even when the door is wide open, people are too afraid to walk through. They don't see the chains imprisoning them, because they have been taught to see the chains as loving protection.

I backed off with my parents and took the conversations slower. I spent a considerable amount of my time talking with my mother and eventually broke through the indoctrination. Eventually, my dad followed. After a year and a half, I finally dared to come out to them and share my true identity, and thankfully, they had deconstructed enough to accept me and support me.

During this time, I had met a gay ex-Jehovah's Witness man online, who lived in [REDACTED]. We became close friends, and eventually, I travelled to America to meet him in person, and we started a long-distance relationship. Upon returning to Australia, I decided to come out to my sister. It was a calculated risk, but I knew that my journey was getting to a point where people would start to know that I was in a gay relationship, so I wanted to be the one to tell her.

Initially, she expressed support and promised never to shun me or cut me off from my nieces. But eventually, she reneged, sending me a message cutting off contact, not just with me, but also with my parents. I later learned that the elders in her congregation had pressured her and her husband to do so. The indoctrination, reinforced by elder influence, convinced her that we were bad association and a threat to her and her family.

Meanwhile, I became engaged to my partner, and he came to Australia to visit and meet my parents. During his stay, the elders from my former congregation, which I had not attended, participated in, or communicated with in over 2 years, showed up at my parents' house unannounced and uninvited. My father spoke to them, and they demanded to speak to me, and threatened to disfellowship me (expulsion from the congregation that is announced publicly at

the congregation meeting, signaling to all Jehovah's witnesses to shun me) unless I agreed to attend a judicial hearing within seven days.

A judicial hearing is an internal disciplinary process Jehovah's Witness elders use to investigate alleged wrongdoing. Three elders interrogate the accused to determine if they are repentant, which in practice means ashamed and compliant. These hearings are notoriously intrusive, humiliating, and deeply traumatizing. Individuals are often subjected to graphic, intimate questions designed to shame the person into submission. There is no transparency, no independent oversight, and no real due process. The entire process is designed to reassert the organisation's authority through fear and emotional coercion.

I refused to subject myself to that trauma. Instead, I sent the elders a formal letter stating that I had been inactive for two years and no longer identified as one of Jehovah's witnesses. I explained that the organisation's doctrines, discrimination, and past treatment had caused me repeated trauma and suicidal episodes. I informed them that any public announcement or further attempts to contact me would be considered harassment and defamation and that I would pursue legal action to protect my mental health, reputation, and civil rights.

To my knowledge, they did not proceed with any announcement and have not contacted me since. However, they have continued to pressure my sister and her family to continue shunning my parents and me. As a result, my parents and I are now shunned by my sister, brother-in-law, nieces, as well as all the Jehovah's Witnesses that we have ever known. My parents have done nothing contrary to the rules of Jehovah's Witnesses or renounced their membership, yet their children, grandchildren, and entire community shun them.

This episode was highly traumatic for me and my parents. It is still painful to accept that my sister and nieces are no longer allowed to be in my life.

After that, I got married and moved to [REDACTED] to begin my next chapter of life with my partner. But even here, the pattern of discrimination continued, this time through my husband's Jehovah's Witness family. For years before coming out, my husband had allowed his parents to live part-time in a unit within his house and was subsidising their lifestyle financially. After coming out to them and informing them that he would no longer continue to be one of Jehovah's Witnesses, they began to shun him while living in his home and accepting several hundred dollars in subsidies from him each month.

When he informed them that we planned to marry, they refused to acknowledge my existence, and to this day, my father-in-law has never spoken a word to me, despite living in the same house. When confronted about this, they responded to my husband with a barrage of homophobic abuse. After more than a year of effort and attempts to find peace, my husband finally told them they would have to move out. They refused, and we were forced to initiate eviction proceedings, which ended in court after they attempted to claim ownership of our house.

Throughout this ordeal, my sister-in-law verbally abused my husband, attempting to manipulate him into allowing their parents to continue living in our home. The psychological impact of this whole experience has been deeply painful and has further reinforced how destructive the Jehovah's Witness belief system is to family bonds, identity, and mental health.

During this time, elders from my husband's former congregation began stalking us, sitting in the car watching our house, leaving voicemails, and sending letters demanding he attend a judicial hearing. My husband sent them a formal letter of dissociation and warned them to stop harassing us. It was a very emotional and stressful time for both of us.

Despite all of this, we have just celebrated two years of marriage and are learning how to live our lives. We have both lost most of the people we knew and grew up with. The aftershocks of being raised as Jehovah's Witnesses still echo in our everyday lives, as we try to undo the damage and trauma through therapy.

## CONCLUSION

I want to reiterate that the Jehovah's Witness religion is not simply a religion - it's a high-control organisation that uses coercive psychological tactics to recruit, indoctrinate, and retain members. From birth, individuals are exposed to fear-based messaging, emotional manipulation, and threats of divine destruction. The organisation claims absolute authority over its members' thoughts, behaviours, relationships, and even private identities.

The mechanisms of control are sophisticated and multifaceted. They include:

- Behaviour Control: Strict rules regulate every aspect of daily life, from sexual conduct to medical choices, social relationships, and personal expression. Members are surveilled and can be reported by others for minor infractions.
- Information Control: Jehovah's Witnesses are forbidden from reading outside sources about their own religion. All critical materials (including news articles and government reports) are labeled as "apostate lies," and members are taught to avoid them at all costs—even when such information may protect them.
- Thought Control: Independent thinking is highly discouraged. Members are trained to interpret doubt as weakness, loyalty as salvation, and obedience as love. Any questioning of doctrine or decisions is seen as rebellion, and punishment is served out.
- Emotional Control: Fear, guilt, and shame are used to maintain obedience among members. They are taught that their worth is conditional on how well they serve the organisation. Emotional manipulation extends to threats of shunning, armageddon, and divine rejection.

These methods work together to entrap individuals in a system where freedom is illusory and leaving comes at the cost of family, community, identity, mental health, and in many cases, their life.

The effects are far-reaching:

- On Individuals: Many former members, like myself, live with long-term trauma, including anxiety, depression, complex PTSD, and suicidal ideation, as a result of growing up in this environment. LGBTQ+ individuals face especially severe harm, often internalising years of shame and self-hatred.
- On Families: The practice of shunning alone causes devastating rifts. Parents are pressured to reject their children. Siblings and extended family are cut off for non-compliance. Jehovah's Witnesses are told this is "loving" - but it is emotional blackmail disguised as faithfulness.
- On Society: The organisation hides behind its religious status to avoid scrutiny and accountability. It discourages therapy, evades legal consequences, and creates isolated communities where abuse-spiritual, emotional, and even physical-can occur unchecked. Members are trained not to trust outsiders or secular institutions, including courts, medical professionals, or governmental authorities.

I hope that this inquiry will consider the full extent of the damage and the far-reaching impact of these recruitment and control methods. Jehovah's Witnesses are not just a religion - they are a high-control, coercive cult. Children born into this group are denied freedom of thought. Adults who wish to leave are punished. Those who are recruited aren't told the whole truth about what joining will cost them. And families like mine are torn apart simply because we choose to live authentically.



I share my story to make the Inquiry aware of how much harm and suffering is caused by the Jehovah's Witnesses Organisation. No child should have to endure what I have lived through. No child should grow up fearing the loss of love, parents, siblings, family, or friends, just for being themselves, or questioning what they've been taught. No adult should be punished for choosing autonomy. And no organisation - religious or otherwise - should be permitted to operate above the basic standards of psychological safety, family integrity, and human rights.

Regards,

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of the sender.