

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

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Date Received: 28 June 2025

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I want to share my experience of being raised in and leaving the Jehovah's Witness cult. Many people think that Jehovah's Witness are a bit strange, but mostly friendly and entirely harmless. This is so far from the truth, and their methods of control are ones that have impacted my life and will continue to do so for the rest of my life.

My Mum was approached in the last 1990s by Jehovah's Witnesses. They trekked up the long driveway of our rural [REDACTED] property, and Mum said she felt sorry for them and invited them in. She was impressed by how far they'd come to speak about God. She also shared with them that she had thrown her Bible away not long before, and that she was a lapsed Catholic. Mum was raising 5 children and we were sitting just above the poverty line. Witnesses tend to really home in on vulnerable people – often ones who have suffered a terrible tragedy, have a disability or are on hard times. It makes their message of hope so much more likely to land.

My Mum converted quickly, and we began attending 'meetings' as church sessions are known, 40 minutes away 3x per week. It was financially hard to manage, my dad was very disapproving, and it was a sore spot in their marriage until Mum died.

We moved to [REDACTED] as teenagers, and Mum continued her association with the church. To people on the outside this may have looked like a positive thing – she'd stopped smoking, her children were well mannered and seemingly cohesive. All 5 children continued going to church with Mum. We made friends there, however outside of that our lives were challenging as we stood out from our peers at school – we didn't celebrate holidays, we weren't allowed to visit our school friends (they were considered 'worldly' and therefore bad and potentially dangerous companions), and we had to do door-to-door preaching work on a Saturday which was mortifying.

As a young person you are encouraged to commit to God early – there are different levels, and each earns you great heaps of praise. Children as young as 12 are baptised and this is talked about at church meetings and treated with envy and respect by other members. Before you get baptised you become an unbaptised publisher. This involves noting down how many hours you spend preaching each month (any less than 10 hours and the church elders ask you why), and you have to have a private meeting with two church elders (all elders are male) so they can verify your suitability for the role. There's an announcement made, and often people shower you with gifts when you become unbaptised publishers or a baptised Witness. My older sisters became publishers, and I followed – around 15 years of age I think.

The church is particularly judgemental of young women and their appearance. There is a lot of control about what you wear. The church published articles in their magazines and even brochures with pictures of what is appropriate. This includes: skirts below the knee, sleeves that cover the shoulders, dresses that don't cling to the body and anything 'flashy'. As young women we wanted to show our own style, but Mum would be pulled aside and admonished if anything seemed out of line. My younger sister wore a skirt above her knee to the supermarket once, and my Mum burned it.

There are strict rules about interacting with people of the opposite gender. For women you can't ever be alone in a room or a car with a man. You can't touch or flirt, exchange text messages or sit next to each other in church unless you're engaged. We would see other young witnesses in social groups at each other's houses, where parents watched us closely.

My later husband (now ex-husband) and I began flirting when I was 15 and he was 21. He was counselled to stay away from me because my family were apparently 'wild'. He began texting me secretly but would be wracked with guilt about it and tell me we were not going to 'live forever' because our relationship was sinful. We began meeting up and eventually had sex. He again was so wracked with guilt, which could only be assuaged by confessing he said. One day after church he revealed to his parents what had happened. They then alerted the church elders who began investigating the 'case'. I was brought before 3 male elders without support or another woman present. I was asked about our relationship, the sex, and whether I liked in and would I want to do it again. I had to agree that I had committed an evil sin and that I wouldn't do it again. They said that there would be an announcement to the congregation that I was no longer eligible to an unbaptised publisher. They told me that I was bad association and that their families would not spend time with me. My ex-husband was cautioned that if he had sex with a minor again they 'may have to report it', but no action was taken apart from an announcement that he could no longer have 'privileges' like teaching in the church. His mother came to my house to tell me she forgave me for what I had done and wanted to pray with me.

We rekindled the relationship around 6 months later, and when this was revealed he was removed from the church by disfellowshipping. He was devastated as his whole family are Jehovah's Witnesses and he lost his job as he worked for his father. When you are disfellowshipped, if someone sees you they are to not greet or speak with you. You are not to contact your family except in emergencies (a family illness/death). For a while we didn't go to church. But we didn't have any other family support, and slowly we decided to go back and to try to get reinstated into the church, a process that can take years. We would attend church and sit at the back and no one could speak to us and we couldn't say a word. Eventually, after we were married (I was 18) and I was pregnant with our first child (I was 19), my ex-husband was finally reinstated. It had taken two years. I cried with gratitude. Suddenly, the tap was turned back on and we had unfettered access to the family – invited for dinners, included in church picnics, spoken to. I continue to find it so bizarre that everyone can switch so quickly

from one way of treating a person to another, when really nothing fundamentally has changed about that person.

I continued in the church until my early 30s.

Some of my experiences until I left:

- I was discouraged from education and despite finishing school with exceptional scores took a job and didn't go to university. Teachers tried to convince my Mum this was a complete waste, but my job was to find a job that would support me to do the preaching work.
- In my early 20s and with two small children I decided to do an online degree because my grandmother had left me some money. My husband and his family viciously opposed this. His family refused to acknowledge it, even when I brought it up in conversation. My husband refused to help me with childcare so I could study so I studied late at night and when the children were asleep. I enrolled my youngest into a childcare one day per week and he was so angry with me he didn't speak to me for days.
- My Dad who was never a Jehovah's Witnesses was shunned by the church, and elders in the congregation told other members to avoid my family as my dad was a bad person who shared evil ideas. My Mum felt the most of this as she wasn't invited to gatherings because they didn't want my dad there.
- We were encouraged to give money to the Church every month. We didn't have much money, but we always did. One time we took \$2000 out of our savings and donated it. We were so proud of ourselves because we thought that money could be used to help bring people to God.
- My older sister was disfellowshipped and we shunned her. This remains one of the most shameful things that I live with now. I can't believe that I did that, especially when she needed us. But at the time I was told it was the loving thing to do, that it keeps the congregation clean, and that it brings people back to God.
- We were discouraged from materialism which was probably easy as we had no money. I remember at one point we wanted to think about buying a property, but we were told the end of the world was coming soon and to invest in Satan's evil world was a sin.
- I suffered terrible loneliness and depression. Being discouraged from associating with people outside church meant I did not have a network of other mothers and I didn't have support as a young mum. When my oldest started school, I had to fight with my husband to allow him to have playdates with school friends. He was not allowed to be in organised sport, as this was sinful and a waste of precious preaching time.
- Even with two small children I was expected to go to 3 church meetings a week and go preaching. The only time you could get away with not going was if you were sick. If you don't attend you get bombarded by text messages from 'concerned' church members

wishing you good health and awaiting your return. Even when you are on holidays you are expected to find the local church (Kingdom Hall) and attend that one.

- I had an ectopic pregnancy that was threatening my life. I was told to come into the hospital immediately to end the pregnancy. Before we went to the hospital we went to my husband's parents who pored over the scriptures to decide if having this medical treatment was a sin. When they determined it was ok only because my life was in danger we went to the hospital. In the hospital I had to refuse blood transfusions as Jehovah's Witnesses view them as sinful. The Doctor warned me that I may die without one but I continued to refuse.

I want to tell you about my experience in the last 5 years since I left the church. I want to preface this by saying that I wanted to leave for a lot longer. I'm a smart person and I didn't believe a lot of what we were taught. The Governing Body – a group of men in America – make up rules (they say they've received new insights from God) and change things all the time. We were all beholden to them. We were constantly being told the end of the world was coming and we needed to be ready. Even if we were faithful our whole lives, if we had any doubt at Armageddon we would be dead. This could even be bad thoughts – lack of faith or impure thoughts. We were taught that God was seeing everything so even our innermost thoughts were on show to him – we were in fear of even thinking the 'wrong' thing. Because the end could come at any time, we were kept in anxious anticipation of it. We were told that we would undergo tests, and we would have to betray others to get to the other side, including our own family. We were also told not to get too close to our own family if they weren't believers, as they were just going to die anyway. If we ever doubted our faith we were told that we are not meant to understand everything and to pray more. We were strictly banned from watching or reading anything about Jehovah's Witnesses online as this was called 'apostate' material, designed to scare us back into 'Satan's world'. My Dad often told us about things he knew about Jehovah's Witnesses from the internet, but we were told to ignore it. Regardless, I couldn't believe a lot of the teachings. I could also see the patriarchal and misogynist structure of the church. I didn't feel my children were safe. I challenged an Elder when my children were young because he said they didn't have to tell us if there was someone in the church who was convicted of child sex offences. I didn't know how to leave. My husband's family, most of my family and my few friends were in the church. I truly believed that I would have to die to escape. I wanted to die most of the time.

We moved to [REDACTED], and as I was the one with a degree and good job prospects I began working and my husband stayed home and went preaching, because he believed if he showed God his commitment, God would bless him with a job.

During COVID he wasn't working and became paranoid. This wasn't the fault of the church but they didn't help. He became very controlling and would weaponize the bible, telling me that he had a right to my phone, my location, my money, etc. because the man is the head of the woman. He started restricting my money and accusing me of cheating on him. He called

elders who came to our house to counsel me. I told him I didn't want to be in the church anymore. He said he couldn't love me anymore. Eventually it escalated and he was removed by police. The elders came only once to my house, apparently to offer comfort. They asked when I was taking him back, and I said I wouldn't be. They demanded to know if I was having an affair (I wasn't). They didn't come again for two years. I hadn't really been at church for a while and I never went again.

I proceeded with divorce and somehow retained a couple of congregation friends and my family because I was technically still in the church. This changed when two elders came to my house again and demanded I come to a judicial committee – this is their court room where they judge cases of sin. They said I was accused of adultery and there were two witnesses. I told them I didn't have a husband anymore so I couldn't commit adultery but they disagreed as apparently I was still 'spiritually married'. I refused to attend the committee. They decided to hold it anyway, and my ex-husband and my sister both testified against me. They said I had revealed to them that I was in a new relationship and was therefore 'cheating' on my husband. I was disfellowshipped.

My last ties to the church ceased then. My Mum, [REDACTED], would no longer speak to me. My sister who testified also would not have any contact, nor could I see my nephews. My best friend disappeared. I was no longer allowed to take my son's witness friend to school as I was an evil influence. The isolation could have crippled me – and this is how they get you – they take all the people in your life away and wait for you to come back. But I couldn't. I'd come too far. Thankfully, and the only thing that saved me in those early days were my younger sister who had already left the church, and my two 'worldly' work friends who looked after me, checking in on me everyday. Without them, maybe I would have gone back out of desperation – I hope not. The other things that helped was I had forced and advocated for myself to get a degree and I have a good job. I could afford to be a single mum. Most women in the church have no training and no money of their own. They couldn't leave if they wanted to. I have friends still in the church who are in abusive relationships and who are desperately isolated and lonely. I miss them but I don't know how to help them as you need to be able to see for yourself how coercive and manipulative it is.

I saw my sister at my Mum's funeral. There's that funny Jehovah's Witnesses rule where you can associate but only in family emergencies. It was a strange time because she behaved like she was gifting me something by speaking to me but asked me nothing and took no interest in me. As soon as I left my parent's house she cut off contact again. My ex is still very engrained in the church – more so now I think. He still takes my kids – one is an adult and one is a teen – to church sometimes and I work really hard to undo the bigoted teaching. I encourage them to embrace all kinds of people and to have lots of friends of all religion, sexual orientation, lifestyle, to try to counteract the Jehovah's Witnesses that everyone who is not one is evil.

I'm very happy to answer any questions about my experience. I felt strongly that I should share my experience as I know I'm not alone, and the impacts of a cult are far reaching.

Thank you,

