

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

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

I am a ██████████ girl raised from birth as a Jehovah's Witness in Victoria. I left in December last year and am still healing from my time in the religion. This group exercises high levels of control over members' beliefs, behaviours, and associations. It has detrimentally impacted my life, and in this letter I wish to outline the controlling practices I experienced, the impact it has had on me, and my first-hand observations of how Jehovah's Witnesses recruit members. It is my hope that this submission provides insight into the inner workings of Jehovah's Witnesses and how, in my strong opinion, they exhibit cult-like teachings and practices.

Examples of controlling practices

From childhood I was taught a number of controlling and coercive ideas:

- We must shun ex-members of Jehovah's Witnesses and completely cut off all contact with them, even if they are a family member. These ex-communicated members are called "Disfellowshipped." Members can become disfellowshipped for "sins" such as premarital sex or adultery. Communication with ex-members can risk punishment, such as the loss of privileges in the roles in the Church (like removal from leadership positions), or even risk excommunication.
- Committing "sin" risks punishment. Depending on the severity of the "sin", a person can lose a privilege in the Church, or worse case scenario, be excommunicated and cut-off from association. Serious "sins" that could potentially result in ex-communication include smoking, gambling and premarital sex.
- Association with non-Jehovah witnesses is greatly discouraged. I remember as a child watching videos published by the organisation that condemned making friends with other children at school. As a result, I had very few friendships growing up.
- Searching up information on the organisation or listening to non-organisation sources is strictly prohibited. People who critique Jehovah's Witnesses are labelled as "Apostates", and these must be strictly avoided. Growing up I never dared to search up on the internet about the religion I was raised in, as the Governing Body (Leaders of Jehovah's Witnesses) warned us about the "dangers" of it.
- Strict no blood-transfusions policy, even in the case of a medical emergency. Jehovah's witnesses' would rather risk death than accept a blood transfusion. I remember as a child I used to always have on me a "No Blood" legal card which my parents made me carry, though I did not consent to this or understand what it meant. Last year, my sister underwent surgery ██████████, and I could only

watch as she told her Doctors that she strictly refused any Blood transfusions, even if something went wrong. Fortunately, nothing went wrong in the surgery, but that experience still leaves me chilled to this day.

- Fear of leaving because of fear of everlasting destruction in Armageddon. From a young age, I was taught that leaving would result in everlasting destruction at Armageddon. Because of this, I stayed in this religion for a long time out of fear of God's punishment.
- Pursuit of higher education is discouraged. As a child, I dreamed of becoming a doctor, but leaders and members consistently told me that such goals were worthless and unfaithful to God. Instead, Jehovah's Witnesses place great value on full-time volunteering in proselytising work. Members are expected to dedicate large amounts of time—sometimes 60 to 100 hours a month—reporting their hours to elders (elders are leaders in the Church). Additional volunteering includes cleaning Kingdom Halls (the Church) or assisting in administrative tasks. This lifestyle is presented as “the best life ever,” and deviation of such is seen as evidence of spiritual weakness.

The impacts it has on my life

These practices have caused severe and lasting harm. Today, I suffer from depression, anxiety and guilt. I regularly see the school psychologist, but even then, it's a struggle to heal from all this. Most days I am plagued with heavy feelings of sadness and distress. The sudden loss of an entire community of friends has been disastrous to my mental health and wellbeing. Because friendships outside the religion were discouraged, I had been left with no social network whatsoever since leaving. This has not only contributed to a poorer mental health, but also has made me feel ill-equipped to function in everyday life.

And having been under constant scrutiny and forced toward a future I did not want while I was a Jehovah's Witness had caused an immense detrimental impact. As a child, I often felt hopeless and wished I could die. I am a lesbian, and since Jehovah's Witnesses condemn homosexuals, I thus developed extremely low self-esteem and overwhelming guilt, and often entertained suicidal thoughts when I was a child. Even today, these memories continue to affect me.

My educational goals have also suffered. My parents did not support my pursuit of higher education, so I grew up unprepared compared to other students. University was discouraged, I was given little time to study, and my parents prohibited me from choosing prerequisite courses for the careers I wanted to pursue. Now I suffer the consequences of building from scratch a social network and future that my religious upbringing failed to let me embrace.

Recruitment tactics and methods

Jehovah's Witnesses require all members to participate in “the ministry,” which involves proselytising and converting people. This is done through door-to-door visits, standing in public places with displays and literature, and initiating informal conversations by building trust under the guise of friendship. The goal is to invite people to meetings and engage them in Bible studies intended to convert them.

The ministry is highly organised and recorded. Elders maintain detailed records – maps noting every house visited, whether the residents showed interest, and which homes to target for repeat visits. If a person agrees to learn more, they are offered a Bible study. These studies are vigorous and not benign: The goal is to convert the person. Key teachings, such as the ban on blood transfusions, are deliberately withheld until later. Studies are designed to engage emotions and present the religion as the only path to truth and salvation. Children are often forced to participate, regardless of their understanding or consent, just like I was.

My recommendations

I'm not here to say that Jehovah's Witnesses should stop functioning as a religion as a whole, or be completely banned in Victoria. But I do think awareness should be spread and certain practices of Jehovah's Witnesses must be stopped.

I believe there really needs to be:

- A greater awareness on the impact of religious shunning
- Services to help those who leave high-controlling religions
- And careful consideration of whether certain practices of religions should actually be allowed

In my view, the shunning policy, the prohibition of blood transfusions, and coercive punishments has got to be addressed. I also think that Jehovah's Witnesses recruitment practices deserve scrutiny. Should religious groups be allowed to knock on private doors or advertise publicly on streets without clear disclosure of their beliefs? Should they be able to offer Bible studies to underage children who do not fully consent? Perhaps there must be limits put in place.

Thank you for reading my submission. I appreciate the opportunity to have my voice heard.

Kind regards,

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