

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

Name: Name withheld

Date Received: 13 July 2025

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withheld

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

[REDACTED]

My name is [REDACTED], I am a 47 year old female who was born in to and raised as a Jehovah's Witness until I left that group via a formal letter of disassociation in December 2019. I am completing this submission to add my voice to other ex-Jehovah's Witnesses and hopefully help others avoid experiencing what I have experienced.

When you are born in to the Jehovah's Witness faith, there is no option to explore other beliefs or to even consider what you personally may believe. There are meetings three times a week to fill your mind with what you should think. You are given the answers to everything, there is no need to even want to think for yourself. And you are taught that all other beliefs are under the banner of 'false religion', something you do not want to get caught up in.

While growing up, I was constantly warned about 'worldly' people (anyone not a Jehovah's Witness). I was not allowed to make friends at school. Being a social and positive person, people were drawn to me and I wanted to be friends. I would play with other children but constantly monitor myself to not get too close. I would feel guilty if I had too much fun or began to like the other children too much. I was told to constantly 'keep separate from the world' and that if I had to spend time with worldly people, I should use those opportunities to 'witness' to them (try to convert them). I tried to do this a few times but with mixed results. Several times I was talked to by teachers who told me I could not tell other children that they were going to die at Armageddon as this was upsetting to them. I genuinely felt that I had to let them know – I knew that these children were good people and did not deserve to die at Armageddon and so I felt responsible to make sure they were saved. I was very fearful of being in trouble so instead I stopped talking about and identifying myself as one of Jehovah's Witnesses. This caused a new set of problems – I constantly felt guilty for not identifying myself and not witnessing at school. I was also constantly scared of being 'found out' – particularly as I entered later primary and then secondary school – I did not want anyone to know I was a Jehovah's Witness. I did not want to be seen as different – I was already earmarked as different by the way I dressed, I didn't ever swear, I didn't wear makeup, I never went to any extra curricular events or parties and I didn't celebrate birthdays or Christmas. Being invisible was all consuming to me. I lived in constant anxiety – that I was going to be found out at school, or that I was going to be found out in the

congregation – found out that I wasn't living up to my responsibilities as a Witness to proudly identify myself and use my school as my own witnessing territory to bring in new members.

I was sexually abused by my father throughout my childhood. Growing up as a witness reinforced my need to listen to and obey my elders, to not speak up, to not bring reproach upon Jehovah's name by highlighting any problems at home or in the congregation and to always 'be a good girl'. I finally disclosed the abuse to my mother at age 12. She took me to an elder to discuss what to do. He stated that since there were not two witnesses, no action could be taken. He did not encourage or support us to approach the police and make a report. I begged my mother to not leave my father – I simply could not be responsible for splitting up the family or for having this shameful secret made any more public. So we simply went home and continued as though nothing happened. There was no follow up pastoral care via the elders for me or my mother. My father was free to keep attending meetings. He was not officially baptised so there was no need to take action in any case.

I was baptised at the age of 16 while I was doing my Year 12 VCE. For several years prior, I had one-on-one bible studies with a dedicated and passionately faithful 'Sister' in the congregation, [REDACTED]. I admired [REDACTED] very much – she was funny, attractive, married to a lovely 'Brother', I wanted to be just like her. She believed fervently and she was successful in passing that on to me. She was very strict in her beliefs – no 'greys areas' existed for her, and she would often give me counsel. My skirt was perhaps a tiny bit too short, colouring my hair was borderline disrespectful, going to university was absolutely not an option when my focus should only be on doing more to serve Jehovah. [REDACTED] was extremely intelligent and could have gone very far in a career, but instead she was a pioneer who spent 90 hours minimum witnessing per month (including her study with me).

At school I performed extremely well. My teachers were always encouraging me regarding various career options to consider when I left school and absolutely thought I would go to university. To placate them, I applied for university at the time when we all had to do so. But I knew that attending any place I was offered was not an option. I was offered a position at [REDACTED] University to study [REDACTED]. While I was pleased that my hard work was recognised by this offer, I did not think twice and declined the place. My parents did not discuss with me either my VCE results or any university offerings. It was just not important. I got a job as a receptionist.

Work was then a continuation of school, battling within myself to either disclose that I was a witness or to live a 'double life' which we were warned against constantly. Depending on the workplace, I sometimes identified myself and set about trying to have studies with colleagues. At others, I hid my 'true' self and suffered with the guilt of doing so.

I married a faithful brother at the age of 21 and we had three children together. Each time I announced a pregnancy, his mother was borderline distraught that I was bringing another child into this world. Not having children was seen as the moral high ground – why would we want to have children when the end of the world was so very close and children took so much of our time and effort away from preaching the ‘good news’.

In 2014 my husband ‘woke up’ and realised that we were in a cult. He was beyond devastated. As a true believer, this broke him to the core- his whole life appeared to be a lie with wasted opportunities. And the path forward was impossible. And so began the worst 10 years of my life.

When he told me that we were in a cult I was terrified, confused and hurt. How could he be saying these things? He had turned into an ‘apostate’, the worst of the worst according to our beliefs. How would our family survive this? And yet I could see that he was the same man he had always been. We had huge arguments. We had nowhere to turn. I was desperate that he get help from the elders. He knew they would disfellowship him so refused to meet with them. After several months of panic and chaos, his mental health completely obliterated, he sent a letter of disassociation in November 2014.

I was classed as a ‘spiritual widow’. Someone to be pitied but also to be wary of. I was still living with this man who was an apostate. He could be poisoning me. We were no longer allowed to have any of our friends from the congregation visit our home. This affected my children so negatively. I asked the elders if the children’s friends could visit if I knew my husband was at work and they stated it was just too risky. What if he came home unexpectedly?

My children and I were invited to members of the congregation’s homes – my husband could not attend. I could not accept these invitations and participate in shunning of my husband. **This meant that we had absolutely no social contact except when we went to church.** We had not built up any social networks – I had no friends outside of the congregation, the children had not made strong friendships with those at school – as per the requirements of our faith. **We were completely isolated.**

My children and I were constantly anxious. Our whole world turned upside down. My husband was barely able to function. He went to work, came home and went to bed. He was unable to engage. I forced family outings every weekend, after church on Sunday. I tried so hard to make life feel normal and okay. But we all knew it was not.

I received subtle pressure constantly from the elders and congregation. My spirituality was in danger. But what other option was there? To separate from my husband? A man who was already completely isolated and struggling, simply because he had researched scriptural matters and found our doctrine to be lacking? This caused a very big crack in my faith. I was told that I could separate on the grounds of spiritual endangerment. But I would not have grounds for divorce, I would need to remain married or forever single if I

divorced my husband. These were the rules. Slowly slowly, the crack in my faith grew bigger. I began distancing myself from the congregation. I worked to slowly make some friends outside of the congregation and joined the local gym for this purpose. This caused concern to my close friends in the congregation, I might start spending too much time with others who did not share my beliefs. There was a talk given by an elder who gave told a cautionary tale of a sister who started going for walks to improve her physical health. Before long, the neighbour saw the regular walks and asked to join the sister as it was more motivating and enjoyable to go with another person and they would be able to encourage each other to reach their health goals. The two continued regularly going for walks together and it all seemed very harmless. However, what was really happening here? The elder cautioned us all, a friendship was being formed with a worldly person. It would start as an innocent walk, then it would be 'let's have a coffee after our walk' and then, what next? As I had already had some cracks appearing in my faith, this talk forced a crack or two to widen. I felt it was directed at me and, even if it wasn't, were we really being told that we couldn't even go for a walk with a person who wasn't a Jehovah's Witness? It was so controlling!

I had very close friends in the congregation, friends I had grown up with and moved to Bairnsdale to be closer to. I had to constantly be careful what I said – while I was grateful for their support through those initial hard years, now that I had my own doubts about our faith, it was increasingly difficult to hold normal conversations. I worked with two sisters from the congregation so each time I missed a meeting (what we called going to church), which I was doing more and more often, I had to provide an excuse. They grew more and more concerned about my sporadic meeting attendance and tried harder and harder to encourage me and subtly warn me about my husband 'winning' by making me an unbeliever too.

I began to be love-bombed, various members of the congregation reached out to me by calling or texting me to check on my welfare and express concern about my lack of meeting attendance. Some of these members I had barely even spoken to the whole time we had been in the congregation. The pressure was intense. One elder's wife continued to text and ring me almost daily. When I didn't respond via phone, she tried to message me on Instagram, then Facebook and then WhatsApp! She was relentless. In the end, I had to change my phone number, it was just too much pressure. As I worked with witnesses, I also made the difficult decision to leave my place of employment and seek a new job elsewhere.

The last straw for me was when my best friend berated me for attending the Mothers Day Fun Run in Melbourne with my daughter, because the event was related to Mother's Day (which we were not allowed to celebrate). I tried to explain that I participated to support research into breast cancer, not to support Mother's Day but she was adamant that I had done the wrong thing and also set a bad example for my daughter.

I stopped attending meetings altogether from then on. I then endured over a year of trying to pretend I was still a believer in order to keep lines of communication with my friends and family open while at home starting to deprogram myself and my children. This was an incredibly difficult time for my children and I. I felt like I was deceiving everyone that I loved but it was the only way to keep the relationship going. Conversations could only be superficial. I could not express my grief at losing my belief system as well as my regret at not having believed my husband 4 years earlier and the pain I caused him.

Things may well have continued that way if it were not for my father. After having an affair, my father divorced my mother when I was 19 or 20 and married a 'worldly' woman (a lovely woman actually). They had a happy 20 years together but she unfortunately got cancer and died. My father during that time lived as a worldly person, celebrating Christmas and birthdays etc – we were estranged during this time at my request due to his sexual abuse of me as a child.

Once his wife died, my father returned to the Jehovah's Witness religion and started 'studying' again to be baptised. My grandmother and my aunt, who I was very close to, knew what he had done to me as a child. However, they welcomed him back into their lives. When I heard that my father was approved to be baptised, I decided I had to distance myself completely from the religion, even though it meant I would lose forever my friends and family who were still in it. I sent my letter of disassociation and attach a copy of it as Appendix A. I wrote to my best friend, my sister in law, my aunt, my mother in law, and my grandmother explaining how very hard the decision I was making was and asking that they please see that they are saying that this paedophile was worthy of their love and acceptance while my husband was not. I begged them to see that this did not make sense and was extremely unfair. I received several text messages saying that they were sorry for what had happened to me but goodbye. My best friend did not respond to me at all and has not spoken a word to me since.

The impact that the cult of Jehovah's Witnesses on me and my family today are:

- I feel constant stress and anxiety when I need to go to the shops or into town for any reason in case I see a witness and am shunned by them
- I have lost relationships with my grandmother, my aunt and uncle, my cousins, my sister in law, my two nieces, my mother in law and all of the friends I ever had growing up
- My children only have one grandparent who will talk to them and cannot understand why they were excluded from the rest of the family for reasons they had no control over
- All three of my children have anxiety and two of them are medicated for it
- Due to my childhood sexual abuse, I have little to no memories of my childhood. My best friend used to act as my memory since she was involved in so much of

my life. She would constantly tell me stories about things that we did – I now have no source of history regarding my early life.

- I suffer from religious trauma and have a physical reaction in my body when I hear the word “Jehovah”
- I am unable at this time to even begin forming new beliefs and I am working hard just to stabilise what my own true values are

I could go on and on. These are lifelong impacts, not just to me but to my family. And I am one of the lucky ones – thankfully my mother stopped attending and supports me and my brothers and I have grown closer now that we are all non-Witnesses. I have reconnected with an uncle and aunt who were never Witnesses and they have proven to be the most supportive and loyal family I could hope for. Many others do not have these supports and many take their own lives due to the guilt, fear, loneliness or heartbreak.

I hope that this information provides a perspective for consideration, no doubt it echoes others who have submitted. I feel I could write a novel with our experiences but know that this would be too onerous for a submission, and this many pages might already be too many.

At the very least, I hope that mandatory reporting for religious organisations be considered as well as access to mental health supports for those who need assistance to leave a high control religion or group.

I thank the Inquest for accepting my submission and am happy to be contacted to clarify any matters at all.

Yours sincerely,

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

Appendix One

A story of three men in my life

My husband

A good man, moral to the core with a strong sense of justice who always strived to the right thing. Avoided wrongdoing his entire life, suffered through awful guilt and shame the few times he “fell short” according to the rules he followed at the time. Confessed, repented, worked harder to be better. While growing his spirituality, discovered new truths and changed his belief system at great personal cost.

My brother

A good man, maybe not so moral, but with a heart as big as the universe. Always strived to please others and make people happy, even when he was struggling himself. Loved living life to the full and therefore, always in trouble according to the rules he was supposed to be following at the time. Disfellowshipped but tried (and succeeded) to come back several times to please people at great personal cost to himself.

My father

Not a good man. No morals. A paedophile as reported to elder bodies on two occasions. As he had never been baptised there were no reprisals (and of course no report to the police). A man who abused his children as well as others. A man who manipulated his family constantly at great cost to each of them. A man who caused emotional scars so deep to his wife and children that they will never, ever, be healed. A man who, when things were getting too complicated (as his children were older and perhaps would soon start holding him to account), started a secret online dating profile where he lied to a lady about being a widower. Began a relationship with her in secret while still married. Then divorced his wife, left his family and began a new life with a new family.

Which of these men is welcomed with open arms to my family who are Jehovah's Witnesses? And which of these men is not welcome in any way including even to greet let alone associate with?

My father the paedophile has now begun associating with the congregation again. Therefore his entire Witness family, who know of his paedophile status, have welcomed him back. He is allowed to go and stay with his Jehovah's Witness daughter-in-law and

grand-daughters while their OWN FATHER (my brother) is not allowed to speak to his daughter who got baptised and now shuns him. My husband is not welcome at their home or at any place where they might be.

This is not right. And worse than that, it is cruel and disgusting behaviour by those who call themselves Christians - to welcome back with open arms a paedophile but reject my husband and my brother.

I, [REDACTED], hereby resign as a Jehovah's Witness.