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# A Nameless Insular Religious Sect Is Being Rocked by a Massive Sexual Abuse Scandal

Known to outsiders as the “Two by Twos,” a little-known community is reckoning with a far-reaching scandal over sexual abuse, accountability, and power.



By [Anna Merlan](#)

The dead man was found in his hotel room, slumped over in a chair. It took six months more before the letter began circulating, accusing him of harboring a deeply disturbing secret when he died.

Dean Bruer died in Government Camp, Oregon on June 21, 2022, in a Best Western motel, embedded in a copse of towering pine trees just off the highway. Several websites covering Bruer’s death have attributed his death to a heart attack; his family did not publicly specify his cause of death in his obituary.

“We have come to the tragic conclusion that Dean Bruer had another side to his life that none of us, except victims, ever witnessed or suspected,” the letter, dated March 20, 2023, read. It was written, according to several people with intimate knowledge of the community, by Doyle Smith, who’d taken over Bruer’s role.

“It has come to the surface in recent months, and more so in recent weeks, that Dean was a sexual predator,” Smith’s letter continued. “We *never* respect or defend such *totally* inappropriate behavior among us. There is a *very* united consensus among us that the *only* thing to do is to be transparent with all of you for obvious reasons, though this is very difficult. We are very sorry for the hurt this will bring to the hearts of many. Thankfully, he is no longer in a position to hurt anyone.” (Italics his.)

Smith added, “His actions include rape and abuse of underage victims. He *totally* abused his authority as an overseer in order to control, manipulate and threaten his victims. We are strongly recommending our staff look at the Ministry Safe Program and possibly other venues that help understand, recognize, and prevent such problems.”

Smith is, as Bruer was, a member of an insular and nameless Christian sect often known to outsiders as the Two by Twos. (Smith did not respond to a request for comment from VICE News. His letter has been reprinted on at least four different websites set up for current and ex-members of the sect.)

The name is drawn from the practice that its homeless, itinerant preachers—known as “workers”—follow, traveling in pairs and sleeping in the houses of congregants. The church has existed for over 100 years, although many of its members believe its lineage stretches back directly to Jesus Christ; members of the community often say they follow “the Truth” or “the Word,” or simply refer to themselves or one another as “professing.” Cherie Kropp, an expert on the church’s history, estimates that in 2022 membership was about 75,000 worldwide, a decline of about 50 percent from its peak in the early 1980s. There are members all over the world, mostly concentrated in English-speaking countries, including the U.S., Canada and Australia. Some former believers describe themselves as having been in “a cult,” while others do not.

Workers and overseers are meant to be celibate, and are viewed as profound spiritual authorities, seen as intermediaries between ordinary believers and God. Members of the church believe in what’s called “exclusivity:” the idea that the church is the only true one, and that workers and overseers, who direct them, are the only way to salvation. Prayer meetings happen in people’s homes and, occasionally, at large conventions. Overseers manage swaths of territory that, in the United States, often comprise multiple states. There are no good records on the number of overseers worldwide, but former members say there are fewer than 10 senior overseers in the U.S. When he died, Bruer was the overseer for Oregon, controlling the finances for workers in that state and where they were sent to preach.

For an overseer to be accused of sexual misconduct—or even sexual activity, given that workers are meant to be celibate—was already a serious scandal. As Smith’s letter began circulating through the community, though, the accusations spread too, rippling outward as in a pond that has been suddenly and violently disturbed. People began coming forward to say that Bruer was not the only one, and that they, too, had been subject to sexual abuse by workers, overseers, and elders in the community. Many said that they had been sexually abused as children, talking for the first time of being subjected to misconduct in their own homes by workers who’d been allowed to stay with their families, or at conventions where they were surrounded by people who were supposed to protect them.

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The Bruer letter, as it is known in the church, spurred a massive sexual abuse scandal and an equally profound reckoning, driven largely by women, many of whom are survivors themselves. Dozens more workers and overseers have been accused of past sexual abuse towards adults or children, with some of the accusations going back decades. Calls for the alleged abusers—as well as those who failed to stop them—to step down have grown louder and louder. In some territories, the accused workers have “left the work,” as the terminology goes; in others, leadership has ignored the scandal, or outright declared that nothing will change. In one instance, an overseer told his territory in a letter that he would only step aside when called to do so by God.

The power held by workers and overseers has led some advocates to say that addressing the deep-rooted sexual abuse problem in the church will require nothing less than changing the doctrine of the church itself. They argue that workers and overseers must be removed from their central roles in the faith, stripping them of the intense spiritual and social power that seems to have contributed to the culture of fear and silence around their abuses.

Both current members and people who have left the church have played a role in advocating for the rights of survivors and for transparency about what’s going on, and are said to be seeking justice

through both criminal and civil court processes, according to people familiar with the situation. They've also helped believers literally find the words for what happened to them, in a faith where many things go unsaid.

But survivors also face a simple logistical issue in seeking justice: The religion isn't registered as an official entity, has no formal structure, and—on paper, anyway—no leadership to speak of. Lawyers are said to have declined to take on survivors' civil lawsuits, and it remains exceedingly rare for the alleged abusers, or those who protected them, to be criminally charged, though there are exceptions.

As it stands, some survivors and advocates are working on a far more basic task: creating a paper trail to try to figure out where abusers worked, when, and who might have known about their misconduct. And those still in the faith are examining the prospect of radically reimagining what the religion could look like, to make it safer for children growing up within it.

"It's about time that all of this comes out in the open," one survivor of childhood sexual abuse, T.S., told VICE News. (She asked that we refer to her by her initials.)

"There are so many secrets in this religion," she added. "Too many."

Selkie Hope grew up in the church, in a very literal sense. Their father was the fourth or fifth generation of believers in the family, and when Hope was a teenager, their overseer asked the family to move from Oklahoma to Missouri and take over what's known as a "convention grounds"—a large property, often farmland, where the faithful periodically gather for days-long meetings to listen to workers preach, something known as "having fellowship." Hope remembers a flock of people descending on the grounds just before their annual convention to meticulously prep and clean.

At around age three, Hope says, they were sexually abused by the son of their parents' closest friends. "I didn't have the words to understand what had happened," they have written, "and when I told my parent, they told me it was just a disgusting dream and not to talk about it again." (For years, in fact, they thought they'd been closer to age 5 when they were abused, until quite recently, when piecing together a timeline with their parents.) At age 12, they have written, after being forced to stay with the same man for an evening while their parents were at an event, the abuse happened again.

Hope left the church in their early 20s after getting married; they reasoned that it would be more acceptable for them to stop attending church if their spouse wouldn't let them go. Otherwise, they say, "I was afraid that I would get excommunicated by my family."

In the aftermath of the Dean Bruer letter, Hope became involved in advocating for the rights of sexual abuse survivors in the church; with several other people, they founded Voices for the Truth, a non-profit offering advocacy, education, and resources for former and current members of the church. After years of a somewhat distant relationship with their family, that's all changed recently, they said.

"Since this news broke, I have probably spent 10 hours a week on the phone with my parents, talking to them about how to talk to their overseer and how to press for changes."

DETAIL FROM THE VOICES FOR THE TRUTH WEBSITE

Thus far, prominent workers and overseers within the sect have not responded to media reports about the widening abuse scandal. A journalist for the Daily Dot, whose family belongs to the church, wrote a deeply reported piece about the situation; several overseers within the church did not respond to her request for comment.

Similarly, several workers and overseers named as abusers in internal letters circulating within the religion did not respond to requests for comment from VICE News. Nor did people who have admitted to knowing about widespread child sexual abuse within the church, and who put what they knew in writing in messages they sent out to their congregations.

Those letters have ranged from apologetic to defiant. Merlin Affleck, an overseer in Canada, wrote an unusually frank and raw letter to his flock in May of this year, apologizing for not knowing how to talk about sexual abuse.

“In hindsight I realize more than ever that I was in over my head and floundering as I was trying to understand and get up to speed with CSA,” Affleck wrote, using an acronym for child sexual abuse. “I do want to apologize to victims amongst us for my lack of understanding and the additional pain that this has caused them. I truly am sorry.”

In the letter, Affleck also announced the rollout of an updated “Child Safe Policy,” purportedly designed to keep children safer from sexual abuse within the church and help survivors. It pledged “better communication” and a commitment to keep conventions safe from child abuse, but notably did not lay out a legal framework for how child sexual abuse might be reported to law enforcement. Sources within the church say that going to the police has often been tacitly or overtly discouraged.

#### DETAIL FROM CHILD SAFE POLICY FOR BRITISH COLUMBIA

“I hope we all can work together to find a way through these issues in a more united way,” Affleck added. “We are aware that our enemy’s most effective tool is wedge-creating divisiveness.”

Despite the nominal lack of structure in the church, there are three men who insiders say have a special degree of power: Ray Hoffman, Dale Shultz, and Barry Barkley. Hoffman is the informal leader of the eastern half of the United States, having taken over for Barkley, according to people well-informed about the church’s structure, while Shultz controls the Western half of the U.S. and Canada. (All did not respond to repeated requests for comment from VICE News.)

“We want to be part of the solution, not part of the problem, as we have been in the past.”

A victim advocate group published a timeline in July, laying out what they allege were the decisions made by all three men over the years in response to various allegations of abuse within the territories they control. In a town hall meeting in June, though, Hoffman specifically denied having downplayed abuse or moved alleged perpetrators, telling the room, “If people can prove that I knowingly moved a perpetrator to another field I will happily step down, I will happily step down, I will go to jail, I’m not afraid of jail. I don’t think it would be wise to step down off the suggestion of one person.”

Letters the men have sent to their congregants have also been posted online, typically soon after they’re sent.

“The Master is purging His family and we know He wants us to care for the victims,” Hoffman wrote in a June letter, which was posted on one of several websites for current and ex-members of the church. “We want to be willing for this purging and remain on the Vine so the fruit of His efforts could come forth to make us more ready for our Bridegroom’s return. We want to be part of the solution, not part of the problem, as we have been in the past.”

Despite pleas for unity from some overseers, divisiveness certainly exists, in spades; the situation within the church right now can best be summarized as “chaos,” said Abbi Prussack.

Prussack and her husband Mike grew up in the church, the children of families who’d belonged for generations. At 21 and 19, respectively, they married. It didn’t take long before they realized that neither of them truly felt connected to the church’s teachings, or faith in general.

“We don’t remember who even said it,” Abbi told VICE News—only that one day, one person turned to the other and said, in essence, ‘When you pray, do you actually get a response, for real?’”

Now 35 and 34, with three children, the Prussacks and another couple, Kyle and Kari Hanks, run a Facebook group for former members to connect. It’s one of several such groups. The group was lighthearted until the scandal broke; then it became a space for information and disclosure, with even current members joining to get the information they felt church leadership was not giving to them. Abbi eventually helped to co-found Voices for the Truth, the non-profit advocacy group.

Other groups have also been very active in pushing for alleged perpetrators to be removed from positions of power, if they are workers or overseers, or asked not to attend meetings, if they’re ordinary members of the religion accused of abuse. One major voice is Advocates for the Truth, founded by three women. One is Cynthia Liles, a private investigator and a former member of the religion who has investigated alleged abuse within major institutions including the Boy Scouts and the Catholic Church. Her cofounders are Sheri Autrey and Lauren Rohs, both survivors of sexual abuse within the religion who’ve written publicly about their stories. (Members of Advocates for the Truth declined to comment on the record about their work when reached by VICE News.)

In emails from Liles that have been posted on the ex-member message boards, she excoriated church leadership for failing to take action against alleged abusers, reminding them they had both a legal and moral obligation to do so.

“Society expects institutions to keep their communities safe—especially the children,” she wrote in one such letter. “You may say, ‘Oh, he’s an old man and he’s in a wheelchair,’ or ‘he’s not in meetings with children.’ To the victims, that shows you are standing with the alleged perpetrator and not with them. In addition, I have worked on cases where perpetrators were still abusing children well into their 80’s. Pedophilia is not something that goes away with old age.”

A church with such widespread sexual abuse echoes for generations, survivors say. “People don’t know what boundaries are,” said T.S., the childhood-abuse survivor. “They don’t know how to have a relationship where they aren’t minimized or negated. They’re just prey. They have it written all over them.”

“A lot of us felt for a long time that something was wrong,” says Selkie Hope, the Voice for the Truth co-founder and member. “And maybe we even experienced that ourselves. But there’s such a focus on

if something bad happens it's your fault because you don't have the right spirit. All of us internalized it."

But even with an enormous and multifaceted outcry, the issues in forcing structural change in the church are obvious.

"Every overseers' area is dealing with this differently," Abbi Prussack said. "They actually had an overseer meeting, which is unusual, and had a child sexual abuse advocate speak to them, who was from outside the church. That was a new concept."

"There are a lot of overseers right now who are being asked to step down, and nobody can make them."

But as people connected to the church understand it, Prussack said, the result of the overseers' meeting was that they agreed "there wasn't going to be a unified policy" in how they responded to the abuse allegations.

"There are a lot of overseers right now who are being asked to step down," she added, "and nobody can make them."

It's also difficult to track any history, including things as basic as where workers have been and when, making abusive ones hard to trace. Lists are released periodically that say who a worker's "companion," or the other worker they'll be traveling with, is. These are always of the same gender, with one person usually being younger and the other older.

Historically, members have been advised to burn the lists after receiving an updated one, Abbi Prussack says. "So there's no centralized information anywhere. I've been trying to compile lists of where people have been, pictures so people can put faces to names and it's so hard to fill in those gaps because those lists are gone. There's no accountability. We can't prove that so-and-so was in Alabama this year. And we don't know who stayed where night by night."

The Prussacks say they now have a decent number of lists, and have developed an understanding of troubling patterns—for instance, when someone works in one state, and then pops up soon after in another, or even in another country entirely.

"Someone who's been moved several times, that's a red flag," Abbi said. When she and her husband watched *Spotlight*, the film about the *Boston Globe* uncovering the Catholic Church's abuse scandal in part by tracking where pedophile priests were sent, they both recognized that they were tracking similar alleged patterns.

In the United States, there have also been a handful of criminal cases against workers and overseers. A website, Workers Sect, [has a list of criminal charges](#) brought against people it claims were workers and overseers between 1997 and 2016.

While some survivors are grappling with how to move forward, other people who grew up in the church are trying to answer even more basic questions about their own histories—ones that, to date, they say the church authority figures have not helped with.

One such person is T.S., the survivor who spoke to VICE News. When she arrived in the United States as a young child, she was in a state of terror. She was born and raised in the 1970s on Pohnpei, part of the island nation of Micronesia. As was common in the region at the time, her mother had gone abroad to work, and she was left with her grandparents. A white family from the United States arrived; they were part of the church, there on a sort of missionary-cum-sightseeing trip. Their guide was a man named John Mastin, a worker based in Pohnpei for many years.

AERIAL VIEW OF KOLONIA, POHNPEI ISLAND, MICRONESIA. IMAGE VIA GETTY.

The family decided that they wanted to adopt a boy and a girl from the area, T.S. told VICE News. When she was just three years old, she was sent to the United States to live with them, with Mastin and at “his suggestion and facilitation,” she says. It’s a situation she doesn’t feel her mother was fully informed about, as she wasn’t residing on Pohnpei at the time; an aunt and uncle signed her adoption papers. Some of her cousins were also eventually sent to the U.S., a situation which she thinks was sold to their parents as a way to allow their children to get the benefit of an American education, rather than a permanent placement; some of the cousins, she said, were “bounced around from family to family.”

When T.S. arrived at her new family’s doorstep, after weeks of being in Mastin’s care, “I just remember being completely terrified of men and my new dad,” she said. “The story my family always tells is that I would run and hide and cry. I was terrified of men.” She remembers hiding underneath a ping pong table, cowering in fear, and of her new adoptive father holding her forcibly in his lap to try to cure her fear of men, which only made it worse.

Today, T.S. is clear that while she has no memory of it, she believes she was sexually abused by Mastin when she was left in his care, and that some of her cousins were abused by him as well. (When reached by phone, Mastin hung up as soon as I identified myself as a journalist. Over the course of a week, he did not respond to a detailed phone message or to text messages my editor and I sent seeking comment on the allegations outlined in this story.)

“Although my little toddler brain protected me from actually remembering what has happened to me,” she said, “with my body’s visceral reactions and the way that sexual abuse presents as you grow older, I have no doubt in my mind that I was abused sexually as well.”

This year, T.S.’s suspicions given more weight by a letter sent to church members by a group of three overseers, informing them that Mastin had admitted to sexually abusing a child during his time on Pohnpei.

“We have recently received other similar allegations from victims and their families which indicates a troubling pattern,” the letter added.

For T.S, it was a new outrage: The letter also said that the overseers were “in touch with some who have connections on Pohnpei and offering our support to those involved.” That did not include her, or her family, T.S. said: “Never once have I or any of my family on the island side been contacted.”

The situation strengthened her belief that the church is fundamentally sick, she said, that people need to “amputate themselves from this rotten core.”

“I feel as if people will need to walk away from this structure completely and cut all ties with it in order for it to die,” she said. “Create your own.”

Nothing happening in the church is exactly new. Accusations of abuse have been surfacing for years. For just as long, there’s been a deep logistical and spiritual struggle over how to respond. One of the earliest people in the United States to speak out was a woman named Rebecca Ginestar, who in 1996 released a self-published book detailing what she alleged was a history of spiritual abuse and incest during her childhood in the church.

Ginestar alleged that her primary abuser was her father, and that she’d tried many times throughout her childhood to disclose his abuse, first by going to a worker who her family knew best. The worker, she alleged in her book, responded, “This could destroy ‘the truth’ as you know it. So, we have to be careful that this information does not get into the wrong hands.” (Ginestar died in 2013; a surviving family member acknowledged an initial request for comment from VICE News but did not respond to subsequent messages.)

Years before the Bruer letter, believers in Australia were also rocked by a similar sexual abuse scandal. In 2019, *60 Minutes Australia* ran an aggressive expose which claimed that senior members of the religion in the country were ignoring child sexual abuse, shunning those who spoke out about being victimized, and accused the religion of exercising “cult-like control” over its members. Members of the church in Australia have found one another through TikTok, where they frequently give updates on the latest overseers to step down, or refuse to do so.

Other cases hint at how long these abuses have been going on. In 2016, a former worker in Ireland was convicted of sexually abusing a boy whose parents’ home he’d stayed at in the 1970s. In 2013, a longtime Michigan overseer named Jerome Frandle was convicted of failing to report abuse and sentenced to several days in jail and a \$733 fine.

In a neat bit of foreshadowing, during a court hearing in 2012, Frandle’s defense attorney Thomas Lessing argued that Frandle wasn’t in a position of power, given the sect’s namelessness and decentralization.



MR. LESSING: You really raise an important point there. There is not specific denomination at all ah these individuals subscribe to. They believe in Jesus Christ. They believe in what the bible says. There is no denomination. There is no name for these--for the group of people that believe in this form of worship. There is no unified structure. There is no unified chain of command. There, in fact, is nothing. That is why the prosecution cited nothing. They want to show that he had some level of authority or some level of supervisory ability in this "organization" but they can't even identify the name of the organization that he somehow has authority for.

"There is no unified structure," Lessing said. "There is no unified chain of command. There, in fact, is nothing." The prosecution, he added, "wanted to show [Frandle] had some level of authority or some level of supervisory ability in this 'organization,' but they can't even identify the name of the organization that he somehow has authority for."

Another worker, Bruce Waddell, was convicted in 2010 of molesting a seven-year-old girl while staying with her family; outside the courthouse, he told a reporter from the *Saskatoon StarPhoenix* that he'd previously offended against other children, and that the matter had been handled without the involvement of police.

"There's been other victims but that's been looked after," Waddell said, according to a report by journalist Betty Ann Adam. "We looked after the others before," he said, adding, "Everybody forgave me. The ones that I did, the parents forgave me. We believe in repentance and forgiveness."

Adam also reported that Waddell specifically told him parents of the other children didn't want to go to the police:

"They didn't want to go to the law of the land," he told her. "They wanted to leave it in God's hands."

Workers traveling in pairs and other rules and conventions of the church are the process of years of evolution, according to Cherie Kropp. Some of them have a clear scriptural basis, while others do not.

"In the beginning," she told VICE News, "their only goal was to make converts to Christ."

Kropp is an author and the foremost living historian of the history of the church; she grew up in it herself as a third-generation believer, and left in 1990. Her leaving was the end of a long and extraordinary process, in which she set out to learn as much as she could about the tradition in which she was raised.

At the time, Kropp was the mother of two young children, living in Oklahoma, where her then-husband was working. She had plenty of time and curiosity, and she'd started to have questions about the church, specifically its roles for women; like others who grew up within it, she'd been taught that she needed to have long hair and forego makeup. She'd also begun to be bothered by the idea that her friends outside the church wouldn't go to heaven.

"They were just so godly," she told VICE News. "It wasn't right to me." (Kropp is still a devout Christian, and carefully refers to the church as a "church," not as a religion, which delineates clearly that she departed a specific organizational structure, not her belief in Jesus. She spoke to VICE News solely about church history, not about the current abuse allegations.)

Kropp had heard third-hand about a 1982 book, now long out of print, titled *The Secret Sect* by Doug and Helen Parker. It was, at the time, the only book about the history of the religion, and Kropp was desperate to get her hands on it. But in those days, that was far from an easy task, and it took a turn of fate for her to access it: Her in-laws got a mailer from a ministry in Spokane, which contained an ad for the book. They wadded it up and threw it away, but her then-husband fished it out of the trash and handed it to Kropp.

"He was the first historian," Kropp says of Doug Parker. "I am the second one. They don't believe in putting their beliefs in writing. They're proud they don't have literature. They only have a hymn book and then various little lists here and there, workers and speakers and convention days, that kind of thing. They don't publish literature about their beliefs or anything, and they're proud of it."

What Kropp read in the book astonished her. The religion wasn't part of a lineage stretching back to Jesus, but had been founded at the turn of the 20th century by a man named William Irvine, who'd previously been part of an evangelical movement called Faith Mission.

"I was just dumbfounded," Kropp said.

#### WILLIAM IRVINE IS IN THE CENTER, ALONG WITH OTHER EARLY WORKERS.

She decided that she had to fact-check the book. "I was going to prove or disprove what he said before I decided what I was going to do with my life," she said. She contacted the Faith Mission and got a history of Irvine's time there. She placed long-distance calls, at a time when they cost 25 cents a minute. She contacted newspapers to get certified copies of articles from their archives. What she found, with the exception of a handful of typos and minor details like dates, is that "everything was true and accurate."

For Kropp, this had far-reaching implications. She stopped attending meetings, and so did her-then husband; her current husband is also a former member of the church. As part of that, she rejected the doctrine of "exclusivity"—the idea that the church was the only true one, and that workers and overseers were the only way to salvation.

In 2022, Kropp published a book, *Preserving the Truth*, about her scholarship; with the Dean Bruer scandal, she said, she's been selling multiple copies every day. Relatives and friends who'd seen her as an enemy of the church have begun reaching out again, something she's found astonishing.

"I never dreamed it would happen," she said. "My prayer is that people would have a closer walk with God, that this book would enable them to find a closer relationship with God. I don't try to tell them how to do that. They have to work through it on their own and they're doing that right and left."

"There's a core of people that will not talk about it or think about it," said Bruce Murdoch, "and still pretend that everything's okay."

Murdoch, 70, is a current and lifelong member of the church. He's also the only publicly-named member of a group of people who run *Wings for Truth*, a long-running website which publishes educational materials as well as information about the sect's issues with child sexual assault, including leaked emails from workers and overseers.

"It's not a sea change yet, but that's what we're hoping for."

"I would call it a seismic event," Murdoch said, referring to the Bruer letter. "It's not a sea change yet, but that's what we're hoping for."

Murdoch has been active in denouncing abuse in the church for the past 15 years; he first recalls hearing someone disclose a story about child abuse online in the 1990s, which affected him deeply, and brought other people "out of the woodwork," he said, to share their own stories. By the mid 2000s, he said, it became clear "there's a serious problem here."

Yet Murdoch has also remained a member of the church. "I haven't remained in spite of the problems," he said recently. "I've remained because of the problems. I know the church. If anybody is going to be of any help it would be someone inside, someone who understands."

The scandal in the religion has been so massive that it's spurred a bit of a tech boom. Earlier this year, Shane Garner and Devon Wijesinghe created Connected and Concerned Friends, a private social network for current and former members to talk about both the current scandal and larger questions about scripture and belief. Meanwhile, other websites, *Wings for Truth*, are seeing a flood of new traffic.

For many abuse survivors, the events surrounding the Bruer letter have led to a profound sense of betrayal, and a spiritual crisis. This, too, is not precisely new.

"I feel I have been deceived all my life by my parents and the workers," wrote Rebecca Ginestar, the woman who disclosed her alleged abuse in 1996.

"I am not sure if all the friends know or not, but I refuse to live a lie or be in a system that continues to let the lie continue to thrive," Ginestar wrote in her book, describing her decision to leave the religion entirely. "One must believe in Him—not in a way or system. It is God's approval I desire and not the approval of the workers or the friends. God is the one I will stand before on Judgment Day—those in the Truth will not be judging me."

Former workers have also felt betrayed by the abuse scandal. Jeanie McElroy is a former worker who's now involved with Voices for the Truth; she says she believes she experienced child sexual abuse at the hands of a relative, and struggles to recall significant portions of her childhood. At 20, she says, she was assaulted again, this time by someone she'd been on a date with.

"I brought him back to my house and I was consenting to have sex," she says. "But I did not consent to what happened. I was raped in my own bed, in my own house."

At the time, McElroy says, "I was waiting to go into the work, and had no business dating anybody, let alone having sex with anybody. So I was never able to name it as rape." (In one medical appointment, she disclosed the assault, when asked about it on a checklist of screening questions. The practitioner "didn't know what do with me," she says. She didn't speak about it again for 20 years.)

McElroy was a worker for 11 years, beginning just before she turned 21. For her entire 20s, she lived a homeless and itinerant lifestyle expected of her, her only real stability a spare room at a sibling's house where she could store keepsakes and spare clothes. When her father died during her sixth year in the work, she received an inheritance. Because workers aren't supposed to have bank accounts, she bought herself a few essentials—a laptop, a cell phone, and a camera—and then put significant portions back into the work, putting \$10,000 towards a hymn book project in Japan.

Like other workers, McElroy forewent romantic and sexual relationships during her time in the work; the fact that overseers did not—even when not accused of outright abuse—strikes her as rank hypocrisy.

"To hear about the overseers having decades-long affairs and having babies they didn't take responsibility for, that pisses us off," she said, speaking for herself and other former workers. "They're having their cake and eating it too. Sex is so shamed unless you're married."

McElroy also absorbed messages within the church about the role of overseers and workers, especially men, who have inherently more power than women workers, she says. "The workers and ministry are so revered and put on a pedestal," she says. "You don't say no to them. You do what they want. They're the voice of God." For the most part, she says, "you do what they want and you don't question it and you don't tell anybody about it."

Many other young female workers that McElroy befriended yearned for true connection, she says: love, sex, relationships. That desire for intimacy—both physical and emotional—eventually drove McElroy out of the work. She had fallen in love, an experience that was difficult and confusing, due to the teachings she'd grown up in.

"I think that, with the touch hunger and lack of closeness or intimacy in the ministry, when we have feelings for someone, we feel even more isolated and alone than ever before," McElroy said. "And when things aren't going well in general in the ministry—misogyny, patriarchy, powerlessness, not having a voice—the pros of leaving outweigh the pros of staying, even considering the stigma and shunning that happens after leaving."

McElroy began working through her own experiences—both the sexual abuse she believes she experienced as a child, the rape as an adult, and the religious trauma—with the use of alternative healing modalities like quantum healing and "energy work," which she now also offers to others. Her involvement in Voices for the Truth, she says, has provided another way to help survivors. But she

struggles to visualize what change within the church would actually look like. Concrete, structural change, she says, would mean “changing the entire doctrine.”

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While many like McElroy have left, others have, of course, stayed, and are fighting for their vision of the faith. Some families who own convention grounds refused to hold their conventions this year, people familiar with the church say, after being told they would have to invite alleged sexual abusers to participate.

“There are a lot of people in the church who are talking now,” says Abbi Prussack, questioning things like exclusivity or “talking about losing faith in the institution. There are big topics being talked about, which is massive.”

At the conventions this past August, where groups of several hundreds of the faithful gathered together, there were moments of clear pain and grief, references to the tumult going on just out of view. One man, speaking at a convention in Washington, appeared to grow deeply emotional while speaking to the assembled crowd.

“The last few months,” he told the room, haltingly, “I have been returning to the same few meditations.” He’d been thinking, as he put it, “about the malignancy that we have found in the body, and how I’m part of the body.”

His voice broke slightly as he spoke. “I need to examine myself,” he added, after a pause. “To know what I can do better.”

Other leadership seemed to strike a note of defiance, and a warning about the profound struggle still ahead.

“We have just finished a most wonderful convention season,” an overseer in Alberta wrote to his faithful, after it had concluded. “Our Lord has been so good to us. Perhaps some would have felt there was a ‘crisis’ in the kingdom but that is not happening. This is God’s kingdom and everything is very much under His control.”