



WINGS for Truth

New Zealand Abuse survivor speaks out



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<https://www.thepress.co.nz/nz-news/350288807/abuse-survivor-speaks-out-about-secretive-2x2-cult>

Sinead Gill May 25, 2024



As a child, Damian Townsend was discouraged from making friends with anyone outside of the Christian group he was part of for 20 years.

MONIQUE FORD / THE POST

Former members of a secretive religious sect - under an FBI investigation overseas - want New Zealand authorities to investigate abuse within a group some call a cult. Sinead Gill reports.

Damian Townsend wasn't allowed to watch TV, listen to music, or join a local sports team like other kids did when he was growing up.

He went to public school, but was discouraged from befriending people outside of the high-control Christian group he was a part of for 20 years.

For weeks at a time, a few times a year, two strangers called 'workers' would move into his family home and have their every need paid for, while they preached.

Do you know more? Contact sinead.gill@stuff.co.nz in confidence.

Members, called 'friendlies', follow what they believe is the only way of being Christian.

Townsend didn't know it, but he was raised - and experienced abuse - [in a secretive religious sect](#). The now-37-year-old only learnt the name of the nameless group two months ago.

It is known to outsiders as Two by Twos, 2x2 or The Truth, among others.



In Christchurch, some sect meetings - which leavers say are intended for recruitment - are held in a council-owned community centre.

CHRIS SKELTON / THE PRESS

The sect has been forced out of the shadows in the wake of increased reports of child sexual abuse internationally. The FBI launched an investigation in February.

Some leavers describe it as Gloriavale, but without the commune. Members marry into each other's families and work together. Women dress modestly and keep their hair long, while men don shirts and ties.

"It's a cult. But I wouldn't say it to mum and dad in that way," Townsend said.

"I still have this feeling of overriding control. But I feel now is the right time to tell my truth."

Townsend - who was raised in Auckland, but now lives in Wellington as an openly gay and happily married man - is sharing his name because he knows it will get the sect's attention.

He wants current members - including loved ones he fears are "brainwashed" - to learn what he did: the movement is traced to 1897 and an Irish evangelical named William Irvine, not to Jesus himself.

"What's hurt [leavers] is the fact that ... they lied to us," he said.

"That has been the real mindf..."



It took Damian Townsend years to understand what he experienced was abuse. He never went to police.
MONIQUE FORD / THE POST

He is also hurt by [how the sect's teachings warp peoples' views of love](#). His mum says she loves him as a person, "but she says, 'we absolutely abhor your lifestyle'", he said.

"I've never got the word out of my head. Abhor... it means disgust and hatred."

When he was about 10 years old, Townsend was sexually abused twice by a family friend, while his caregivers were in another room.

The perpetrator had “professed”, meaning he was an official member of the sect, and did it so casually Townsend wonders how many other victims there could be.

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After leaving, he realised how unsafe he and other children had been around certain sect members.

A now-deceased family member, related through marriage, was a known paedophile, he said. Yet, he continued to go to meetings and other peoples’ homes.

Townsend was warned to stay away from the “handsy” man and never be alone with him. It felt like his responsibility to keep himself safe.

He said it made the lines of what was acceptable behaviour blurry.



Some leavers describe the group as similar to Gloriavale, but without the commune.
SUNGMI KIM / STUFF

He and four other leavers - living in Christchurch and Waikato, who spoke to *The Press* under the condition of anonymity - experienced sexual and spiritual abuse, and domestic violence in the sect.

They believe the sect's strict doctrine of blind faith and forgiveness means the group will never be truly held accountable - or all abusers identified - without intervention by the authorities.

Although they say police have investigated individual reports of abuse, a NZ Police spokesperson said it was unaware of complaints regarding the group itself. They encouraged people with concerns to let them know.

Jillian Hishon, a victims advocate and former sect member who runs the confidential hotline [The Brave Truth](#), says about 20% of the more than 150 perpetrators reported to her were from New Zealand.

Many victims had overlapping perpetrators, and it wasn't uncommon for victims to have more than one abuser.

"They [abusers] know how to groom. How to pick the victims," said.

Wayne Dean, the current overseer and spokesperson for the sect in New Zealand, said he was unavailable for comment on Friday.

He has previously told RNZ that known abusers were not welcome in group meetings, and workers were now police vetted and trained in keeping children safe.

Leavers are sceptical abusers will be held accountable.

A Christchurch leaver said there is a huge power imbalance between workers, leadership and members. Within families, women were subservient.

The leavers - all of which come from families who have been in the sect for generations - say current members will deeply fear becoming a social outcast to the only friends and family they have.

They started a peer support group called [Surviving The Truth 2x2](#) on Facebook, and want people who have left to know they aren't alone.