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Photographs from annual “Two by Twos” sect conventions sit on a table at a library Monday, Dec. 9, 2024 in Wailea, Hawaii. Former sect member Pam Walton uses photos and other documents to track the movements of spiritual leaders facing child sex abuse allegations within the group. (AP Photo/Mengshin Lin)

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[By Associated Press](#) Dec 16, 2024

Survivors Seek a Reckoning as FBI Investigates Child Sex Abuse in Little-Known Christian Sect

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Nearly every detail about the religious group Lisa Webb’s family belonged to was hidden from the outside world. Its followers met in homes rather than churches. Its leadership structure was hard to discern, its finances opaque. It didn’t even have an official name.

But for decades, no secret was as closely guarded as the identities of the sexual predators inside the group known as the “Two by Twos.”

Now a growing number of public allegations from around the world have prompted a broad investigation by the FBI and placed an uncomfortable spotlight on the long-quiet Christian sect. Survivors say the group’s leaders protected child-abusing ministers by pressuring victims to

forgive, ignoring legal reporting requirements and by transferring abusers to new locations to live with unsuspecting families.

Ministry leaders have publicly condemned the abuse but several declined to answer questions from The Associated Press.

For Webb, who was sexually abused by one of the group's ministers as a child, the attention has brought an unexpected sense of "strength in numbers."



This combination of 2024 photos shows, from left, Sheri Autrey, Pam Walton and Lisa Webb, former members of the Christian sect "Two by Twos." (AP Photo/Tony Gutierrez, Mengshin Lin, Mike Stewart)

"There are so many who are frustrated and disheartened," said Webb. "But there's also camaraderie in that, and support."

A website, a hotline and social media pages established by victims have documented allegations against more than 900 abusers, with survivors in more than 30 countries and cases continuing to emerge. In the past year, news stories and a Hulu documentary have focused on the sect's predator preachers and the leaders who enabled them.

While perpetrators have been sentenced to prison in isolated cases, the sect has largely avoided legal repercussions, protected by its decentralized structure, hidden finances and state laws that limit the timeline for criminal charges.

The secret sect's origin story

The sect, also known to its members as "The Way" or "The Truth," was founded in Ireland in 1897 by William Irvine, who railed against the existence of churches. The only way to spread Christianity, he argued, was to do as Jesus instructed in the Book of Matthew: to send apostles out to live among those they sought to convert.

The sect grew as volunteer preachers — known as workers — went “two by two” to live in the family homes of followers for days or weeks at a time. Sect historians say there were up to a few million members just a few decades ago, but current estimates put the figure at 75,000 to 85,000 worldwide.



Pam Walton, a former “Two by Twos” sect member who helps track movements of allegedly predatory members through photographs and documents, holds a photograph of a deceased spiritual leader of the sect at a library Monday, Dec. 9, 2024, in Wailea, Hawaii. (AP Photo/Mengshin Lin)

Unlike the Boy Scouts or the Catholic Church, which have paid out billions to sex abuse victims, the sect’s aversion to property leaves it without apparent assets that might be used to pay settlements, legal experts say.

Workers are supposed to shun worldly possessions, relying on followers for food, shelter and transportation. But that also ensures abusive workers have access to potential victims.

Webb was abused by a preacher who stayed with her family in Michigan when she was 11. The man, Peter Mousseau, was convicted much later — after he expressed an interest in visiting her in 2008 and she decided to pursue charges. A regional overseer to whom she previously reported the abuse was later convicted for failing to report abuse allegations against another local worker.

“You have this mindset that they are angels in your home. They can do no wrong, so you don’t have any kind of wall up,” she said. “It was just the perfect storm created, the perfect recipe for this kind of behavior.”

Abusers live among their victims

Sheri Autrey had just turned 14 when a 28-year-old worker moved into her family’s home in Visalia, California, for two months.



Pam Walton holds a photograph of “Two by Twos” ministers, also referred to as “workers,” at a library Monday, Dec. 9, 2004, in Wailea, Hawaii. Walton uses historic photos and other records to track the movements of spiritual leaders facing allegations of child sexual abuse within the sect. (AP Photo/Mengshin Lin)

He began abusing her immediately, sneaking to her room at night and taking her for daytime drives. He turned up the radio whenever the Hall & Oates song “Maneater” came on, singing: “Watch out boy, she’ll chew you up.”

When Autrey revealed the abuse to her mother a few years later, her mom reported it to the sect’s regional overseer, who was in charge of all the workers in the area.

The overseer refused to warn other families. Instead, he sent the worker back to Autrey’s home to apologize.

Autrey, raised to be meek, erupted. Her family took her to the district attorney’s office but declined to put her through a prosecution.

“I would have to explain, explicitly, what happened,” Autrey said. “And I was in no way prepared for that.”

Decades later, Autrey was at a baseball game when “Maneater” came on. She had to walk around the stadium to calm herself down, and she resolved to send a letter about the abuse to hundreds of sect members.

“I wanted anyone else who was a victim to know she is not the only one,” Autrey said. “She needs to know there is help.”

Many more cases of abuse

One worker from Peru, Americo Quispe, was sent to Garland, Texas, in the early 2000s after

facing allegations of inappropriate behavior in his home country. He soon found new victims, some of whose families went to police. He returned to Peru before he could be arrested.

Quispe was later convicted of molestation in Peru and sentenced to 30 years. He has never faced the charges in Texas.

Another worker, Ruben Mata, abused dozens of boys, among them 10-year-old Douglas Patterson, who was lured away from his family during a sect convention in the early 1990s. Patterson said he kept quiet about it because he feared his family would leave the sect — and thus be barred from eternal salvation — if he told.



Pam Walton flips through an album containing photographs of “Two by Twos” members and ministers, or “workers,” at a library Monday, Dec. 9, 2024, in Wailea, Hawaii. (AP Photo/Mengshin Lin)

Mata was eventually convicted in 2006 in a separate sex abuse case. He died in a California prison.

Members told to keep abuse reports quiet

A few months before Mata’s trial, the Saskatchewan, Canada, overseer, Dale Shultz, sent two letters to colleagues.

One was to be shown to any concerned members. It acknowledged Mata was a pedophile and that workers had been alerted to his abuse at least three times. The sect only notified authorities after Mata resigned, according to the letter.

The second was for staff. It said no copies should be made of the first letter.

“The purpose of the letter is to help those who have concerns, not to advertise a kingdom problem to those who either do not know about it or are not having a problem with it,” Shultz wrote.

In another case, a regional overseer for Arizona, Ed Alexander, wrote a letter to a child-molesting elder in 2005 observing that “we love our people very much and don’t want to report their misdeeds.”

The letter suggested the sect could fulfill its mandatory abuse-reporting obligations by recommending offenders get professional counseling, because then the counselors — rather than sect leaders — would be obligated to make the reports to police.

“They believe that child sexual assault is just a sin. Like, you’re a sinner, they are a sinner, it’s all just sin,” said Eileen Dickey, one of the man’s victims. She reported the abuse to sect leaders because she was worried other children would be targeted.

“I was told never to talk about it,” she said.

Alexander would not speak with The Associated Press: “Unfortunately, the media coverage has been so negative and one-sided that I am going to have to decline an interview,” he texted.

Former minister recounts culture of downplaying misdeeds

Jared Snyder spent more than two decades as an itinerant minister before becoming disillusioned and quitting. No one told him directly about abuse, Snyder said, but he occasionally heard rumors.

The sect’s culture — which makes gossip taboo and places tremendous pressure on members to be merciful — meant that misdeeds big or small were downplayed, he said.

“One overseer just explicitly told me, ‘The less you know, the better off you are,’” he said.

As a worker, Snyder received no paychecks, retirement benefits or health insurance benefits, and he was discouraged from using banks. But he was never without spending money: Followers regularly offer cash to the workers, and Snyder said he frequently had thousands of dollars in his pockets.

Most of that money would get spent on building materials, food or other supplies at regional conventions, Snyder said.

The case that exposed the sect to more scrutiny

In June 2022, a regional overseer named Dean Bruer died in an Oregon motel room. Bruer, 67, had served in at least 22 states and territories and seven countries since 1976, according to a timeline compiled by Pam Walton, a former member who has used historical records and photographs to track the movements of predatory preachers.

Nine months after Bruer died, Doyle Smith, the overseer for Idaho and Oregon, wrote a letter to members. Evidence left on Bruer’s phone and laptop showed he had raped and abused multiple underage victims, Smith wrote.

“Dean was a sexual predator,” Smith wrote. “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.”

That transparency did not extend to dealings with local police. It was only after Autrey, another abuse survivor, and private investigator Cynthia Liles — all former sect members — pressured Smith that he turned Bruer's laptop over to detectives, Autrey told the AP.

By then, the computer had been tampered with, according to records from the Clackamas County Sheriff's Office in Oregon. The web browser search history was cleared. Bruer's Apple ID had been changed and files transferred out of his DropBox account. Bruer's phone was never provided to police, and the "Find My iPhone" feature had been disabled.

"What web browsing history was present on the laptop that someone didn't want anyone else knowing about?" Detective Jeffrey Burlew wrote in a police report. Unable to find any evidence of a crime within its jurisdiction, the office closed the investigation.

Smith did not respond to phone messages from the AP.

Survivors and law enforcement dig deeper

Though Autrey and others had long sought reforms in the sect, Bruer's death proved to be a catalyst. Autrey, Liles and another survivor launched a hotline, website and Facebook pages for survivors.

In February, the FBI's field office in Omaha, Nebraska, announced an investigation.

The outcry prompted some sect leaders to condemn the abuse and to ask consultants for advice on how to better protect members. But at least some regional overseers have ultimately declined to adopt recommended child abuse prevention policies — saying the only true code of conduct is the New Testament.

And some leaders still warn members against criticizing the sect.

At an August convention in Duncan, British Columbia, a worker helping to lead the event did not mention the abuse scandal directly but told members to lay aside "evil speakings."

"It's more easy to be critical than to be correct," preached Robert Doecke, a worker from Australia. "If you feed on problems, it will only make more problems. But if you focus on the Lord, it will lead to solutions."

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By REBECCA BOONE Associated Press