

Letter from ex-sister worker Maria – May 2023

WINGS Note: This letter addresses poor communications; inappropriate worker relationships; worker abuse; racism; financial uncertainty; male dominated hierarchy; the trauma of leaving the work; child sexual abuse; and more.

To those who need to hear this:

I was a sister worker for approximately five years. There was such joy and love and people were incredibly kind. However, those things cannot negate some of the systemic problems within the ministry that have only been highlighted by the recent news of despicable behavior by some of the brother workers and the resulting cover-ups.

When I left the work, I was absolutely traumatized. It's not a time I particularly like to think or talk about. However, I want to share it here because I'm not alone in this trauma. I don't think anyone that leaves the work comes out perfectly fine. We all leave pretty messed up and it's not because we didn't pray enough or we lost our calling. It's because the way the work is set up now is a recipe for burnout and trauma. We get in the car with a companion, a suitcase, and prayers. And sure, that's enough to sustain for a while. You read and you pray and you copy the routines of your older companion because they seem to know what they are doing. You pour your heart and soul into finding something that feeds your heart in order to share it with others in gospel meetings. And it works. For a time. You love the people you are serving. You feel like you are helping them. Sure there's this brother worker texting you in a way that you aren't sure is entirely appropriate. But you're happy. There truly is so much joy and people are so good to you.

And time goes on. And you experience more of the love of God's people. And you go on your first special meeting rounds as a worker. You're surrounded by people who know nothing about you and they are curious about your story. Sometimes that curiosity borders on rude because people just want to know where this brown sister worker came from and don't really want anything edifying other than the satisfaction of their own curiosity but there are truly some amazing people among the friends and they love you even before they meet you simply because of the God you serve.

You're so busy now. You're running around having three gospel meetings a week and bible studies and you're learning so much. You've decided to read through the bible in chronological order and you feel so connected to God when you pray. But you bought a silly fictional book on your kindle app to read in your "downtime" and now you feel so guilty for spending the friend's money on something so frivolous so you buckle down and try to do even better. You pray harder and give more of yourself to the people in their homes. And you truly love them all and want only the best things for them and when they share hard stuff with you and your companion you listen and learn and try to help. But there's still this brother worker texting you in a way that you're sure now is inappropriate but now you feel like you're the one who encouraged it because every time you've told him to stop and he didn't you still responded and now it's all your fault so you're just kind of sick all the time underneath all the happy.

But things are still really good. You've experienced convention and preps and special meeting rounds and seen what a miracle it is that it works. Yeah, it's a little cringey that the sister workers do the laundry and the cooking while the brothers do "manly" tasks like it's 1950, but it's so good to be around the other workers.

Your brown skin itches when you stay in a bedroom with a gigantic confederate flag on the wall or when one of the friends says something so racist you want to vomit, but you shake it off and continue moving forward. And more time goes on and you block that inappropriate brother worker on your cell phone and when he starts sending emails you block him there and when he sends you letters you throw

them away. You feel so much better now and are reinvigorated. Sure you have a coworker that uses guilt and shame as a tool to try and control you and who you don't agree with about much of anything but it's just for a year. And when your companion through ignorance answers friends in ways that can retraumatize people you cringe and try to mitigate the damage but you're just a kid really and aren't quite equipped with the correct tools yourself. You can get through it. The friends are amazing in your field and you love them and they care for you and despite everything, you make it through by the grace of God and the friends.

Now you've been in the work for two and a half years and you're sent on another out of state special meeting rounds. It's an honor and a privilege you're told. And you land and it's a whirlwind of meeting new people and traveling and you don't even have a second to process. And soon you're riding up with one of the local sisters to stay the night at someone's home and you're told that the father of the home no longer lives there because he was caught doing something inappropriate to one of the children in the home. However, that same father is coming over for supper because, apparently, since it's special meeting time he needs a special meeting visit too. And you can't say no and scream at how insane that is because you're young and a sister and this isn't even your state but you watch him like a hawk all through supper. And quietly look up the local hotline and make a mandated report once he leaves because it's very clear that neither the local sister or the mother understand what supervised visits means, as they let him go outside to play with the kids when neither of them intended to go out there with him. But you hardly have a minute to process this insanity because you're going from home to home every night and being told that maybe the fact that I exist as a half black, half white human is God's way of fixing all this race stuff even though this particular person "never understood the whole interracial marriage thing."

And on it goes. So much joy and goodness heaped on you that every time you take a breath or feel the need to be just a person and not a worker the guilt nearly cripples you. When at the end of the year your overseer says your companion told him you're too radical and vocal about anti-racism, too liberal, too young to truly understand the way the world works you tuck your rage and hurt inside, and continue going forward. And looking back now, choke on the hypocrisy of reprimanding a young sister worker for speaking up about racism when brothers are running around covering up whole affairs. And soon, some of the hard stuff friends share with you starts bringing up some of your own hard stuff. And again, you don't quite have the tools to handle it and your companion doesn't quite have the tools to handle your crazy but it's still ok. She's trying her best to help you and you're trying your best to be ok. You still feel God's presence when you pray and you still find something to share for gospel meetings so it's all ok. But you keep on going because the good so much outweighs the bad. And you go and you go and you try and you try until you just can't anymore and you're sitting alone in a hotel room with a bottle of pills ready to take your own life. But through timely intervention, you instead go home and have no money and no education and are totally traumatized and sick and have to figure out where you go from here.

This is just my story. Now I want to get to the point of why I'm sharing this.

First is communication. Communicate with new workers. Communicate with the field. Communicate about what's going on in other fields and other parts of the country. Don't communicate with just a select few. Communicate with everyone. Workers go into the work with no guidelines or idea of what they are getting themselves into. They have no idea what is appropriate behavior and what isn't. A code of conduct would go a long way towards clearing up some of that confusion. Also, communicating about whether there are alleged sex offenders in the field is a must. You made me complicit in endangering children by not telling me there was an alleged offender going to one of the meetings in my field. If workers don't know about the offenders that have been reported in the past, how can we make decisions about where people go to meetings or who is allowed at gospel meetings? Because you better believe I would not have been quiet about allowing children to attend any sort of gathering where an alleged sex offender would have access to them. Where children are concerned we can't take any chances and you make all of us complicit in endangering them when you don't make it known who these offenders are alleged or otherwise. Let's err on the side of protecting victims rather than

protecting sex offenders. Zoom and Microsoft Teams are amazing things and those under investigation can attend meetings that way.

On that note, another thing that workers need to make an effort to do is be in touch with what is actually going on in the world and what the friends are actually dealing with. This is something that's hard to describe and something I only recognized once I left the work but it's so important. Workers are insulated. The friends are a buffer between the rest of the world and them. And this doesn't work for several reasons. First, it gives workers a skewed perspective of what humanity is. The friends are on their best behavior around the workers. In contrast, it makes the people who don't go to meetings look worse. This makes workers think that the friends are just better people and makes them want to give the friends the benefit of the doubt. In reality, we are all human. Just because a sex offender goes to meetings, doesn't mean he or she is any less prey to their compulsions than a sex offender that doesn't go to meetings. Not only does this layer of disconnect from the real world skew their beliefs about human behavior, it also disconnects them from some of the very real issues that the friends face in their day to day lives. It also, somehow makes workers think technology is bad. Making it possible for people to attend meetings via Zoom or Microsoft Teams is not the same as being an evangelical television preacher.

Next, sister workers need to speak up. We need you guys to have a voice and a say in the things that are happening. I understand that it's hard to see yourselves in any position of authority. And many of you sister workers have said you have no desire to be in any position of authority. But here's the thing. You may not be able to picture it or have the desire for it, but WE the people you are teaching and loving and helping NEED you to have it. This ridiculous hierarchy among the workers needs to change. The fact that a person is male, does not automatically mean that they should have a meeting and speak for 45 minutes at the end of a special meeting or a convention meeting. By putting a hierarchy on the speaking list, you are automatically telling people, some words are more weighty than others. And that should not be the case since all those words should be coming from God.

Brother workers have their place and the vast majority of them are good men, I'm sure. However, they have shown that they are ok with covering up bad behavior. They have shown that they don't understand what is and isn't appropriate behavior. Child sexual abuse is always awful and needs to be dealt with directly by the authorities. I think we are all slowly getting on the same page there though a lot of progress needs to be made. However, when brother workers are having affairs with women in the fellowship, aside from not living what they preach, there is a power imbalance that makes this behavior unacceptable as well. They can lie and coerce and lay the blame on the victim and tell their victims they won't be believed. And somehow, at the end of it all, they can make their victims believe it was consensual or the victim's fault for tempting them. We need both brother and sister worker overseers to ensure this kind of thing doesn't get swept under the rug or treated as simply a slip-up or an opportunity to shuffle workers around. We need sister workers to have input on companion lists so abusive behavior from older to younger sister workers doesn't get overlooked or allowed to continue. We need to hear from the sisters that things will change and not just from brother workers. Sisters are the voice of the vulnerable and the victimized. They are often easier for victims to approach and yet, they have to turn their concerns over to brothers and have those same brothers shut it down or cover it up. That needs to change. I, for one, am sick to death of hearing meaningless apologies from brothers. I want to hear from our sisters that they aren't going to tolerate this behavior anymore either.

Since workers are going into people's homes, they need to give those same people guidelines on how to keep their families safe. We do not know the hearts of people and workers need to do what they can do to protect the most vulnerable among us. Dean and others like him, had access because people inherently trust the workers. So we need to do better in telling them about how to have guests safely in their homes. For instance, have the children sleep upstairs or even in the parent's room when they have workers in the home.

Lastly, finances. My own experience was fraught with what I could and couldn't spend money on. Nobody told me what to do with the money that was given to me. It was left to me to decide what to do with it and so I'd give some away to people I thought needed it and then just hang on to it or very rarely buy something frivolous like an audiobook that I'd always feel guilty about doing. There needs to be both guidance for the workers and oversight of those finances.

There is more I could say about secondary trauma and retraumatization of victims. I could talk about how exiting the work is handled or not handled. I could even talk about racism among the friends and workers since it was such a key component of my own story or discuss the unrealistic idea that workers need to be "on-call" 24-7. However, I will let this rest for now and hope that my voice added to the many others calling for change will help make a difference too.

A sister,

Maria

P.S. Feel free to share this. I don't mind at all.