

My Story

by Sara Knauss (Lacock)

Before

I was born and raised going to meetings. I grew up in a very loving home and my parents did the best they knew to do for my brother and I. They trusted and respected the workers, so I did too, completely. Growing up, we had workers come for supper and to stay the night. We would listen to them talk about “end times” or answer questions we had. It was often a little scary and I had nightmares about missing Jesus’ return and going to hell. I thought the workers were like angels, they were perfect, and I didn’t know workers ever made mistakes. I knew not to talk about movies or “worldly things” around them, and I could only wear skirts. I professed when I was 12 at convention.

I would wear pants once a week in high school just so people would know I wasn’t Pentecostal. But I was terrified of coming home to the workers at our house when I was wearing pants. I sometimes had a change of clothes with me. I felt a lot of guilt and fear about God and meetings. I didn’t want to read my Bible and always put off getting a testimony for Sunday morning. I felt a lot of guilt if there were normal, worldly things I liked “too much” and would feel condemned until I gave them up. I didn’t wear makeup or party, and was a pretty good, but naive kid.

When I was around 16 years old, a worker was in our home that all the kids liked. Americo was funny and that day we played basketball outside with him. I was wearing pants, which I never did in front of workers. Afterwards, in the kitchen, he came up behind me and secretly grabbed and squeezed my rear. I was completely shocked and said nothing to anyone. That night I kept thinking, “that didn't happen. That did NOT happen.” Not long after, I learned that he molested someone I knew. I barely remember this, but apparently I told my parents I didn’t want any brother workers coming to our house. I remember seeing him at convention that fall and glaring at him when he tried to talk to me. I then heard he was sent back to his country, before any justice could happen for his crimes here.

When I went away to college, I still wasn’t a party girl and went to meetings, but I didn’t feel fully committed to God. I only read my Bible and prayed because I felt guilty when I didn’t. One night while praying, I had a horrible fear of dying and not being right with God. It felt as real as if I actually was standing before God in judgment and was going to Hell. I promised God I would do whatever it took to be right with him. I then had thought after thought about not finishing school, becoming a worker, looking like a worker, not getting married, or having my dream home with a little white fence. Never having my own children. I said, “no, no, no” over and over until I fell asleep. I woke up the next day and started walking to class. I had a feeling of the peace I had felt at convention and the thought, “you could have this all your life.” I said, “I

will." I began to shake and cry. I told my mom that I thought God was calling me into the work. I talked to the workers and offered for the work. I had joy and peace like I had never had before. I craved reading my Bible and praying, and desperately wanted to feel close to God. But it quickly became a very dark time.

Somehow I developed religious OCD and severe depression after feeling "called" to go in the work. I had intense, relentless, intrusive thoughts. I was willing and responsive to these "pokings" that I believed to be of God. Slowly, I changed into a different person and began to die. I began letting go of everything I wanted. It started with wearing pants, watching movies, and going to swing dancing club. I felt so much peace every time I gave in to these "convictions." It turned dark as the obsessions became more and more restrictive. Books, exercise, board games, eating my favorite foods. I eventually reached the place where the only thing I could do without consuming guilt was to read my Bible and pray. I could not even talk about things that weren't spiritual. I had to be serious and sober, and couldn't joke or be silly.

I cried everyday, prayed for hours, stayed up late crying and begging God to feel that peace again, staring at myself in the mirror and feeling like it wasn't really me, dissociating. I woke up in the morning, praying for 3 hours, asking God how to spend my day and if I could go eat breakfast. Never getting an answer. Punishing myself for wanting to eat more than spend time with God. Forcing myself to stay kneeling, my heart feeling like it was going to break from the stress. I was drowning in fear and guilt.

I remember sitting on the couch at home, reading a book, when I had the thought, "thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee." I was terrified. I went up to my room and prayed the rest of the evening. I was so convinced that my thoughts were God's voice that I truly believed I was going to die. I was surprised when I woke up the next morning. I felt this intense need to be ready to die at any moment. I had to be perfect and my idea of that was only doing spiritual things. I endured this torture by telling myself I was laying up treasure in Heaven.

A concerned friend once called to tell me it was important for me to have hobbies and take care of myself. I replied with the verses about Daniel and his friends only eating pulse and how their countenances were fairer and fatter after ten days. I believed that I only needed God to survive.

I had obsessive thoughts about praying all throughout every day. No matter where I was, if I had that thought, I would stop and pray. It would bother me endlessly and I would feel so much guilt until I gave in. And it was never enough. No matter how long I prayed or read my Bible, I never felt satisfied that it was enough. It would bother me the whole day. The constant stress of pushing my mind and body so hard to try to feel peace and reach God was damaging. I developed a nervous system disorder, POTS, during this time, though I wasn't diagnosed for many years.

I heard so many things from meetings, workers, and conventions that fed my extremism:

- “God can tell you how to spend every moment of your day.” - I had to then ask God what to do all throughout the day. What do I do now? Can I go have breakfast? Can I go for a walk?
- “Jesus had no personality.” - I tried to destroy my personality. I became a shell of a human. An empty vessel ready to be filled with God alone.
- “Jesus will come like a thief in the night. Watch.” - I took that so literally that I tried to stay up all night at times. I couldn’t turn off for even a second. I was hypervigilant and tried to be ready at any moment for Jesus’ return.
- “Workers feel so worthless and unworthy.” - I didn’t feel this way so I began to beat myself up in my head to tear myself down. I was so scared of having any pride or feeling good about myself.
- “Pray for everyone you know by name, everyday.” - This took at least an hour every morning. I would say the name of every person I knew and could think of.
- “The first thought you have reveals your true nature.” - I believed that all of my thoughts were a part of me. I didn’t understand that thoughts are not facts.
- “EVIL stands for Eternal Value Is Lacking” - well that applies to...pretty much everything...

I was told by an older brother worker I respected that young workers don’t talk. There was also a story about a new sister worker that had a companion tell her she needed to hang dry her stockings a certain way. The next companion told her to hang them a different way, so she did. I understood from this that I was to do whatever my companion said, even about personal things. I was shown clothes to wear that were extra modest with sleeves below my elbows and taught how to turn undershirts around so they came all the way up to my neck. Dresses and skirts were to reach way below the knee. We didn’t want to tempt men. We had to be more modest than “the friends”, since we would be the example.

Ray Hoffman told me to burn my bridges before going in the work so that I would have nothing to go back to. (Specifically, not finishing my college degree.) So, I deliberately didn’t take one class so I wouldn’t get my associates degree. Before starting in the work, Ray told me to not bring a phone and to only call my parents once a week. I was warned to not tell them about any negative things happening in the field, because a sister worker once did that and her family “lost out.”

I waited for about 2 years to start in the work. I transformed from a teenager that dreaded the thought of going into the work, into a young adult in love with God and the work. I was completely devoted to God and full of an ideological love for the “lost sheep”. I loved to play piano and sing hymns while waiting those 2 years. It was incredibly hard to wait so long. I was 20 when I finally was told I’d be joining the staff at preps that fall. I had no real life experience. I was innocent, naive, completely trusting in God and the ministry, zealous,

committed, convinced of my calling. I was a blank slate, a sponge, open to and begging for constructive criticism, teaching, and guidance. I was taught so much about submitting to my older companions and I was conditioned to be a quiet, agreeable, Godly, and modest sister worker. Even though I had personally experienced a mild incident of child sexual abuse, I was unquestioning.

During

Preps was fun and exciting, but also very stressful. I was struggling a lot with depression still (but didn't know what it was). It was nice to be the "baby worker." I brought people joy and hope, and they spoke of my "fresh sacrifice." I was a martyr. I was dying so others could live. I desperately wanted to be humble and struggled with the special treatment and worker worship. By the end of conventions, I convinced myself that I was a pharisee. I completely tore myself down in my mind while out walking on a path alone. I hated myself and for the first time in my life, felt truly worthless. It felt horrible, but at last, I finally felt humble like a worker should, right?

My first year in the work was very dark. I was thrown right into things from day one in a large field that had a lot of issues. My companion did not believe in mental illness or science, so her solution to everything was spiritual. This was very frustrating for me because I had studied Psychology and was seeing cases that were textbook mental illnesses and abuse. But I was not free to talk. We dealt with a bad physical abuse case that was very hard for me to listen to. The responsible workers present had no professional training and I didn't agree with how the situation was handled. But my voice didn't matter. I was eventually left out of the visits about that situation because my companion saw how distressed I was.

I cried everyday, multiple times a day. I wanted to die. I dreaded waking up in the morning to start the torture again. I felt no positive emotions. I could not feel love, joy, excitement, even when my parents came to visit once. I felt so much fear. I had very scary intrusive thoughts, and believed God hated me and I was going to Hell. I believed every thought and feeling I had.

I abused myself. I sometimes wouldn't allow myself to eat, and denied myself desserts when I felt like God was angry at me for wanting them. I wouldn't allow myself to join in on fun activities because I could only read my Bible. I didn't allow myself to go shopping or buy anything nice. I even wore clothes that a 90 year old lady donated to me. I had to make sure I dressed and did my hair in an unattractive way. I didn't try to cover my acne because it would make me uglier. I would force myself to pray for hours on my bare knees on hardwood floors because I thought "people in prison have to kneel on hard floor to pray." I wouldn't allow myself to use the car heater once because "people in other countries don't have heating." I think some

of this mentality came from my first companion. It was all about, “well Jesus didn’t have 5 suitcases, so I shouldn’t either.”

My companion started our year together right away with having me read a chapter in the Bible every morning. Then, we would take a long walk as I had to tell her everything I could remember from the chapter. This was so stressful and painful. (I have joint issues that I wasn’t aware of then. To this day, I still feel some anxiety when I go for a walk.) We kept very busy in that large field. We would mostly stay at each home for 1 night and have multiple visits per day. This usually included listening to my companion talk for hours with people, Bible studies with contacts, and visiting elderly people in nursing homes. We spent nearly every meal at the table often talking for hours after the meal. I craved so desperately to have a simple meal alone, with no socializing. (I still struggle with sitting at the table visiting after meals. I spent the first few years out of the work without a dining table and preferred to eat on the couch.)

The endless socializing and talking about difficult subjects (I was rarely a part of the conversations, I mostly listened while my brain and body rotted) was exhausting. I had horrible brain fog, not helped by my constant headaches from wearing my long, heavy hair up. I hardly had any time to myself and usually went straight from visiting with people to getting ready for bed. We always read our Bibles and prayed every morning and night. It was pretty expected, and often preached almost as a rule, that people should kneel to pray. I tried for years to kneel to pray, but it affected my heart too much. (It’s a common scene to walk into the sister workers quarters at convention and see every one of them kneeling by their bed, praying. There’s a lot of pressure to do the same.) I finally accepted that I could just pray sitting up in bed and that worked so much better for me. It’s just one example of ridiculous expectations and how there was always the “righteous, holy way” to do things. My only hobbies were writing letters (the oh-so-righteous handwritten letters) and going for walks. I also didn’t really have any friends while in the work, except other young sister workers. People my age didn’t seem to know how to relate to me, and I wanted so badly for them to know I was a real human too. It was isolating and lonely.

At conventions and special meetings, I was praised by older brother workers for my brokenness and humility while speaking (I cried a lot and felt worthless). One even pointed me out to a man at a meeting to show him how hard it was for us workers to speak. I was on display, the perfect humble, struggling worker sacrifice - terrified, trembling, and crying before speaking. An older brother told me he loved my spirit. He was worried about young workers that were “too free” (basically the ones that were confident, happy, and independent). This made me even more scared of being one of “those” workers and kept me dependent and needy. I didn’t want to lose my place, I didn’t want to ever lose my faith and my vision.

I did begin to learn some things my first year. I realized at one point that my laws and extremism were making me judgmental and self-righteous. I realized if that was the fruit being produced in my spirit, then something was wrong. I had been very influenced by Paul (in the

Bible) and his zealous extremism, but I did find some help in the Bible about not being harsh on my body and loved learning more about grace. My mom also was a huge help to me, encouraging me to take care of myself.

My second year in the work, I had a companion that was much younger than my first and realized I was not doing well. She convinced me to go to a psychiatrist. I was so scared to seek medical help because I didn't want to take things out of God's hands. I started therapy and an antidepressant medication. The medicine seemed to slow down the endless swirl of dark thoughts and quieted my mind. I did a lot of incredibly hard work with my therapist and my companion. I did CBT and exposure therapy for my OCD (not diagnosed then) and anxiety. I was so scared of baking, which was something I had loved all my life. I wanted to, but had awful guilt and fear anytime I tried to, so I had given it up. I did it anyways and nothing bad happened. I continued to do this with other hobbies and self-care, and the anxiety about these activities began to lessen. My companion and I went to the gym to exercise. I learned how to sketch and crochet. I began to learn how to think practically and take care of myself. I learned that thoughts are just like clouds in the sky, they come and go. Thoughts are not facts. I began to practice self-compassion. I remade the saying "live each day as if it's your last" to include, "but also live each day as if you might live another 100 years." Take care of your body.

My third year was a regression. I was back in that same large field with my first companion. We were even busier. We had so many studies, visits, and meetings that I didn't even have time to read my Bible and prepare for them all. Also, during this year, because we were so busy, I didn't have time to exercise. When I asked my companion about it, she told me that I needed to just be content with writing letters. And that hopefully my need for exercise would go away. Thankfully, our overseer talked to her about this and how important exercise was. Still, even though I was struggling, she hardly let up with the pace. It was way too busy and my depression got worse again. I also dealt with a man, one of our "contacts," stalking and harassing me that year.

I remember visiting with a family with young children who were concerned about CSA and having workers sleep in their home. They asked how to keep their children safe and what were the workers doing to protect them? (When I started in the work, the Texas workers were all told to take the MinistrySafe course. We were also told to not let children sit on our laps and to never go into a room alone with children without the parents' permission. Never let the door get closed.) My companion's answer was just for these concerned parents to pray because surely God would keep their children safe. I felt angry. As if all of us who were ever touched by a predator had parents that didn't pray for us, for God to keep us safe?

At one point, the overseer thought background checks and a questionnaire might be necessary to screen new workers. His idea was scoffed at by my companion and others. She

believed everything should be led by God. They didn't like the idea of anything man-made or bringing in external systems into our fellowship. They also didn't want to ever involve the law in our internal issues.

My fourth year was with an older companion that had PTSD and mental health struggles. So thankfully, she understood my depression and was supportive of self-care and a slower pace. Unfortunately, she was of the generation of workers that thought they needed to control their young companions. She was also very nervous and high-strung.

We've all heard stories of the old school workers. How they would open their young companions' letters to screen them first. How they forced women to wear black stockings years after they went out of fashion. They wouldn't let people wear engagement rings, so couples wore watches. They would break off peoples' antennas on their cars because they feared the "evil radio." How they would basically condemn people to Hell for outward reasons- beards, hair length, jewelry, clothing, makeup...not caring about their hearts (though this still happens). I was disgusted by these stories. It was not as hard for me with my companion, but it still affected me a lot. I had been an independent adult in college, on my own. Now my personal actions and choices were being controlled and I was treated like a child. (The authoritarian, old-school way people used to treat children.) Emotional abuse. Control. Treated like a rebellious, demon-child if I disagreed or spoke up.

I struggled a lot with my hair and had finally trimmed it because it was extremely painful. I was judged by her for this. A young girl once asked my companion about long hair. She told her that a sister worker once had very long, painful hair. She refused to cut it because "Jesus suffered for us, so I can suffer for him." I was furious at this wrong indoctrination of an innocent child. Basically teaching self-abuse for Jesus' sake. Another time, this companion told a mother that she needed to spank or correct her child because they were super wiggly after being at the table for a long time. The mother was clearly uncomfortable. Oh the old, unrealistic expectations of children. Anyways, after we went to our room, I cautiously told her that it didn't seem like a good idea to say things like that. My companion became furious and said, "I would have NEVER corrected my older companion when I was a young worker." I ran outside and cried for a long time.

My fifth year in the work I was with a companion only a little older than me. That was my only good year in the work. She was so kind and compassionate and treated me like an equal. We would take breaks at a house in the field of a very sweet widow. It was very healing to do puzzles by the fire and to not go at a crazy pace the whole year. Despite it being a "good year," I was still depressed. I still would have been happy to die. I didn't have anything to live for. After all, the only thing that matters is eternity, so we were told. "Nothing matters but salvation." (A hymn from our hymnbook.)

It made me sick to hear stories of how workers were treated in other countries by their overseers. Incredibly overworked and not allowed to take a break and rest after conventions or special meetings. Extremely controlling and abusive companions. And they wonder why they have no young workers? They're destroying them all! But as a worker, you feel endless pressure to be doing more. We're living off the money people give us, and you feel so unworthy. There's so much pressure to be going nonstop and basically, if you're not exhausted, you're not doing enough. At preps, getting sick was like equivalent with having done enough. You worked so hard for so long, that your body couldn't handle it anymore and you got sick. Now you can finally take a rest.

Speaking of preps and convention, they were EXHAUSTING. Yes, it's amazing to finally get to do some physical work. But the workers are pretty much done in by the end of preps and multiple conventions in a row. I would want so desperately to skip breakfast to get a little extra sleep, but it was frowned upon. It was especially hard with my undiagnosed illnesses that caused a lot of pain and fatigue. When I would say something about it, I was told that "everyone is exhausted." And just keep going. One time, I had finished what I was asked to do in the morning and decided to lay down. I was extremely tired and had tachycardia fatigue. Another sister worker came in and saw me and said, "what are you doing?? Go see if they need help in the kitchen!" Young workers were definitely thought of as lazy if we were not working all day long (except during the afternoon nap time). With going nonstop all day, staying up late, and waking up early, I would sometimes have a really hard time keeping my eyes open in meetings during convention. And you are expected to be in every meeting. Getting to cook for a day was amazing. It was a break from having to sit and listen all day.

My sixth year in the work, I was placed back with the abusive companion. I was scared, but decided it was another chance with her to have a good year. It went ok for a while, but I started trying to speak up for myself and voice my opinion. I had no idea how to. It was messy and she was shocked at how "rebellious" I had become. After a few months, I was extremely depressed. I felt like a worm in the dirt. My anxiety was so bad I couldn't finish Special Meetings in February 2016. I went home.

Initially, I planned to do some medical treatments for a few weeks and then return to a different field with a different companion. I was so scared of having to leave the work. It was a life commitment for me. It's funny because at times people would make comments to me as a young worker about not falling in love with a brother worker or question my devotion to the work. But I was very scared of failing God. I kept a healthy distance from men even if I found myself attracted to someone. Looking back, it is sad how scandalous it is for workers to fall in love and get married. There is nothing in the Bible that says this is wrong. But it was always a

"thing" and people would be so discouraged by it. Because workers were expected to be super-human and not have needs or wants. And if they left the work it was because they were "unwilling" or had "nerve problems." The real reason? It's an impossible lifestyle with or without the help of God. And co-worker abuse is rampant.

Being back home with my parents was a huge relief for my body. I slept in the same bed, on the same pillow for weeks. It was incredible. I had my own safe space. I felt like someone that had left prison. I could breathe again. I could make my own decisions and I could finally rest. But I was also extremely depressed and had suicidal thoughts. I remember crying on the floor begging my parents to kill me. I couldn't think because it was too painful. I listened to audiobooks nonstop so I wouldn't be able to think. My foundation was beginning to fall apart beneath me.

After

Life after the work is something no one can possibly understand unless they have experienced it. It is incredibly hard on your body and mind being in the work. Almost every worker I knew had some sort of health problems. They often didn't know the root cause. I'm 99% sure most of it is the lifestyle of a worker. In the work, you don't have much of a to-do list, at least when you're young. Your brain just rots away from the lack of problem-solving and tasks. I would feel so "blah" all the time, just sitting around in peoples' homes. I tried to get out in nature whenever I could and loved the chance to do physical tasks, but it was never enough to relieve the empty, "blah" feeling. I also didn't care if I lived or died. I wanted to die. I lived for dying. I had nothing tying me to life.

As I realized I could never go back into the work (the thought of going back now made my body panic), I began to feel hope again. I began to dream about school, a job, a home of my own, maybe even a family someday? My parents helped me get my own car. I'm so thankful I had them. I had nothing when I left the work. Just whatever money I had in my wallet, a few hundred dollars? No possessions except my worker stuff. I don't remember anyone reaching out to help me during that time. Maybe a few workers wrote me letters? I felt abandoned. I was no longer a beloved worker. The people I had given up everything for and suffered so much for, no longer cared about me. I was lucky my parents were there for me, to give me a place to live and help me get started again. I began community college and finished my associates degree.

I met my future husband in the fall of 2016. He had also been in the work and had similar experiences. He was the only person that understood what I was going through. He has been there for me through this entire process of losing everything. We are rebuilding together from nothing, but it's an incredibly difficult and long process.

My foundation was shattered, but I still tried to believe in God and in "the way." I felt confused, hurt, and betrayed. I had prayed to God for years to feed my soul. To get just one

bread crumb from meeting. It seemed like everyone else had an overflowing cup, and I struggled so much to get anything out of meeting. I just figured I was the one person God didn't love. People would talk about praying and waiting for God to answer, but I never heard anything. I would hear my own thoughts, but I had learned to not trust them. What even is God's voice? How do we know when it's our own thoughts or God? I couldn't figure it out.

A few years have passed and we have children now. I no longer go to meetings or have any faith in the ministry. There are good people, good workers, that truly care. But I was burned by the system, by so many people. I still have frequent nightmares that I'm back in the work, and desperate to get back to my husband and children. At this point I don't believe in God. At least not in the one I used to. He was abusive and cruel. He didn't answer my prayers and he let me starve. I tried for years to go to meeting. I wanted so badly to hear things to heal my hurt and feed my soul. But I would hear things that reminded me of my old OCD way of thinking. Legalistic, self-deprecating, extreme things. And it was triggering and made me angry. I stopped reading my Bible and praying after I left the work. I tried but it would make me feel so much anxiety and panic. I had forced myself to read and pray so much until I was burnt out. The Bible had become my abuser and prayer was my torture chamber. I knew that I had to stop and have some space so I could heal. All my life I heard that reading my Bible was like feeding my soul and I would die spiritually without it. And I had to pray before starting my day so it would go well and I would have the right spirit, and God's guidance, and patience...

It was the best thing for my healing, to just completely stop. And finally I gave up on going to meeting. It was only hurting me more. Our new little family has had many rough years. My health problems have made life very difficult and I often have been unable to care for my children and home. When my husband was unable to find a job without his bachelor's degree, we decided he needed to go to school full-time. It was 2.5 difficult years during the covid lockdown. We lived on student loans and government help. I felt so much shame, like it's my fault for wanting a family. I didn't know my health would get so bad that I couldn't work on the side. But really, it's the system of the ministry that failed us. Neither of us had college degrees. When we left the ministry, we had to start over with just "volunteer minister" on our resumes for the previous 5 years. So much shame and the lack of support from the community and government left me drowning. I became suicidal again and came very close to using a knife on myself. I went inpatient at the Psych hospital and did months of intensive therapy. Throughout all this time, the people in our meeting offered their "prayers and thoughts" through my mom. A couple of professing ladies helped us with our children and I appreciated it so much. But overall, I felt very alone and forgotten. I wasn't wanting attention or hand-outs. I was taught to be responsible and accountable. But I was completely drowning and it felt like people were praying instead of offering their hands to pull me out. I needed tangible help, or at least a text message or conversation to let me know they cared or to ask how they could help. That would have meant so much to me. I felt abandoned by the only community I had.

During this difficult time, I began to meet people that weren't professing. I made new friends and these people were truly there for me. Old friends too that I reconnected with were there for me, checking in on me. People that were what professing people consider to be "outside" and "unsaved" and "worldly" were there for me. A nonbinary or trans person in a Dutch Bros drive-thru once was so kind to me during a panic attack. They showed genuine care for me that made me feel like at least someone saw me. This kept me from following through on my suicidal thoughts at that time. This is the kind of person that professing people look down their noses at. They would call them sinners. This is the kind of person that saved my life.

That was the final "nail in the coffin" for me. I had learned through my experience of leaving the work and going through incredibly difficult times, who was really there for me. I have experienced more love, compassion, and support in the past 2 years since leaving meeting, than I experienced all my life before (excluding my family).

The past year I have also started realizing how damaging the Bible and the teachings I heard were growing up. "The heart is desperately wicked and deceitful above all things." "Don't trust your own understanding." Sinful human nature, hell, punishment, shame. How in the world is this healthy for a child to hear? No wonder I have the self-esteem of a worm. I didn't trust myself, I had no self-confidence, I have been encouraged most of life to deprive and deny myself, I struggle to make decisions... This is toxic Christianity. If there is a higher being, I hope that they are truly pure love and goodness. Because what I have experienced is, yes a lot of people with good intentions and love, but way too much condemnation and focus on appearance. Suppression of emotions and passivity. Too much focus on spiritual life and not enough on the here and now. After I left the work, I realized that workers don't have much relevance. They are unmarried and have no children. Most have no real life experience or jobs. They have no idea how to relate to people and give actually helpful support and advice on practical matters. They live in a bubble and seem to mostly overspiritualize the life out of the same verses over and over. If you want to be a relevant ministry, you need to experience life. The people that have helped me the most are the people that have gone through the experiences before me. They are the people whose advice I will actually trust. Anyone can say anything and have opinions, but they really have no weight unless they come from experience. I went to gospel meetings, special meetings, and conventions for several years after leaving the work, starving for help and getting nothing because of this.

Another thing I have realized is that workers feel like they are the anointed servants of God and can pretty much do no wrong. I remember workers often praying for the Spirit to "overrule." Basically it was this idea that whatever words we spoke as a servant of God, the Spirit would take and give what each person needed. If we accidentally spoke wrongly, it was like wishful thinking that somehow the Spirit would make it ok. This creates an extremely entitled and passive ministry when it comes to the recent CSA/SA issues. Because they are

always “waiting on the Spirit,” who knows what/when that will actually be? In my experience, it’s mostly just your own thoughts interpreted to be the Spirit. So in instances where overseers didn’t want to take action about an abuser because they didn’t want to “surge ahead of God,” they were basically praying about it and trying to get an answer from God. Please, please just start using common sense. Make solid decisions based on what is legal and right. This is not a time for the mystical/questionable guidance of the “Spirit.” Use your brains. And your hearts. Please start using your hearts for the victims. And if you can’t, then use your legs to leave and go do something else. You have no place as a minister if you are neglecting or have neglected the most needy. It’s like the story of the good samaritan. The victims are broken, bruised, and so so damaged. And the “righteous” are walking by, not stopping to help. Look at who is helping the victims. Those are the people that truly have the heart of a servant/shepherd.

Despite the hardships of the past few years since I left the work, it still is no comparison for how hard being in the work was. Because I am free and I have my family. My children are my light and fill my heart so much. I am no longer making decisions out of guilt or beating myself for having a negative thought or feeling angry. Or for not reading my Bible long enough. Or for doing things that I enjoy. I am learning to allow myself to feel all my emotions and to trust that I have a good enough intuition to make good choices. I don’t have to wait and try to figure out what “the Spirit” may or may not be saying. I have common sense and can trust my wisdom, and I am free to make mistakes without fear and learn from them. I am content and I am healing.

Sara Knauss

Texas

04/26/2024

Thank you to the Ex-2x2 Support Group and Advocates For The Truth for your compassion and support.

Other thoughts-

The work itself *is* abuse, emotional/psychological and spiritual at the minimum. The system itself and the culture are extremely toxic. If you were to describe a spouse that controlled your life to this extreme, they would be considered abusive. Many fellow ex-workers I have talked to have suffered with depression, nightmares, suicidal ideation, and PTSD after leaving the work.

According to Psychology Today, "emotional abuse centers around control, manipulation, isolation, and demeaning or threatening behavior."

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/emotional-abuse>

The warning signs-

- **"Monitoring and controlling a person's behavior, such as who they spend time with or how they spend money."** - As a young worker, you are told who you will live with for a year, where, and when. You are given a set amount of money after convention every year. You also depend on your companion to share money with you. You are with your companion 24/7. Sometimes I was not allowed to take the field car and go somewhere myself.
- **"Threatening a person's safety, property, or loved ones"** - I was responsible for my family's salvation. I could not tell them information that could cause them to lose their faith. I was responsible for the souls of everyone in my field, I had to pray for them so they wouldn't lose out. I was responsible for my own salvation. If I lost out, I was going to hell.
- **"Isolating a person from family, friends, and acquaintances"** - I was allowed to visit my family once or twice a year. Told to only call them once a week my first year. They didn't want me to be dependent on my parents. I was supposed to "leave my family behind for the Gospel's sake." At any time, I could have been sent to another state or country.
- **"Demeaning, shaming, or humiliating a person"** - being forced to stand in front of a hundred or thousand people and speak, with no training. Feeling so incompetent as a speaker, and encouraged to be dependent on God's spirit in my preaching.
- **"Delivering constant criticism"** - this varies with companions. But there is such a fear of being called out by the older brother and sister workers. Of displeasing them or being seen as not spiritual enough. They are the ones that controlled my life. Meetings are

also so full of criticism and condemnation over the smallest things. Fear inducing messages about technology, sports, clothing...Finding ways to nitpick at the tiniest parts of our lives, feelings, thoughts, moods...

- **“Making acceptance or care conditional on a person’s choices”** - you must fit in and conform. You must have a particular “spirit” or you aren’t one of God’s servants. If you leave the work, you are shunned, abandoned, and seen as weak or a failure. If you marry, you are discouraging because you have given into your own needs and wants.
- **“Refusing to allow a person to spend time alone”** - this varies by companion and field. There were years that I had no time to myself. Often we were in homes where we both had to sleep in the same room, same bed. I didn’t have my own safe space, with my personal preferences of things that bring me comfort. I did eventually buy myself my own blanket and pillow, to give me some semblance of having my own nest.
- **“Thwarting a person’s professional or personal goals”** - I was discouraged from finishing my college degree. My husband didn’t finish his degree. Many, many workers start in the work in their very early 20s and have not completed college or skills training. I hadn’t worked any real jobs. I was not allowed to have my own will, dreams, wants, needs. I was committed to dying for the rest of my life. I was not allowed to have my own home, car, job, friends, spouse, children. The things that give us a reason to live, that we are biologically wired for.
- **“Instilling self-doubt and worthlessness”** - the amount of messages we hear about this is astounding. For workers and “friends.” All my life, I have heard that I cannot trust my own mind, wisdom, or heart. I cannot depend on myself, only God. I cannot make my own decisions, but have to pray and wait until I get an answer. And what answers did I get? Just my own thoughts, random verses, that I tried to interpret and wonder what was from God, if any of it was? I never got a clear answer from God about anything, no matter how long or hard I prayed. I asked, but I didn’t receive.

The Lingo

- Called the 2x2s by outsiders
- Called “The Truth” or “The Way” by people inside, although technically the church has no name
- Literal interpretation of the Bible’s New Testament
- Meetings - fellowship gathering in the home
- Elder - Man that has meeting in his home and leads the meeting
- Workers - the ministers, they leave all their possessions and homes behind to preach the gospel, they never get married or have children. There are sister workers and brother

workers. Each year they are told who their companion (of the same sex) will be for the year and what field they will be in. (Often an older worker with a younger)

- Field - the city/areas that are grouped together and under a set of workers. "The Dallas field, Ft Worth field..."
- Overseer - The head worker (only males) over a state or several states. They make the lists and decide worker companions and fields.
- Saints (non-workers) and Servants (workers)
- Professing - someone that has stood up in meeting to declare they want to serve God and be part of "this way"
- Baptism - After professing, the next, very serious step of dying to your old life and being reborn. Usually in a pond, the person is fully immersed in the water by a worker.
- Contacts - Outsiders that are interested in "the Truth"
- Gospel meetings - only the workers speak, sharing the Gospel
- Bible Studies - typically Wednesday night fellowship study
- Special Meetings - once a year, several weeks of workers traveling around the state. Workers come from out-of-state. Sunday meetings with 2 meetings, 2 hours long each. Lots of extra worker visits and meetings.
- Convention - annual gathering for 4 days in various areas of the state. 3 meetings a day, the first 2 are 2 hours long each and the 3rd meeting is 1 hour. People sleep in dormitories, tents, or campers. Lots of workers come from out-of-state.
- Mainly use the King James Version of the Bible. Have their own hymn book, "Hymns Old and New"

Basic Unwritten Rules

- Women have long hair ("untouched by scissors") and mostly wear up in a bun
- Women wear modest clothes, only skirts and dresses
- Men have short hair, brother workers have no facial hair
- No makeup, tattoos, or jewelry except wedding rings and watches
- Workers cannot have romantic interests or relationships, or get married.
- No worldly music, TV, movies. No TVs in the house. Many warnings of the dangers of the internet and social media.
- In some areas- men cannot wear shorts. No flip flops or open-toe shoes.
- No sports or anything that would interfere with meeting.
- No divorce and remarriage.

(These rules have evolved over time and are not as strict as in the past. They also vary depending on location and workers)

The BITE Model of Authoritarian Control

<https://freedomofmind.com/cult-mind-control/bite-model-pdf-download/>

I am only including from the lists what I have experienced personally. The full lists are available in the above link.

BEHAVIOR CONTROL

1. **Regulate individual's physical reality**
2. **Dictate where, how, and with whom the member lives and associates or isolates**
3. **When, how and with whom the member has sex**
4. **Control types of clothing and hairstyles**
5. **Regulate diet – food and drink, hunger and/or fasting**
6. **Manipulation and deprivation of sleep**
7. **Financial exploitation, manipulation or dependence**
8. **Restrict leisure, entertainment, vacation time**
9. **Major time spent with group indoctrination and rituals and/or self indoctrination including the Internet**
10. **Permission required for major decisions**
11. **Rewards and punishments used to modify behaviors, both positive and negative**
12. **Discourage individualism, encourage group-think**
13. **Impose rigid rules and regulations**
14. **Threaten harm to family and friends**
15. **Encourage and engage in corporal punishment**
16. **Instill dependency and obedience**
17. **Separation of Families**

INFORMATION CONTROL

- 1. Deception:**
 - a. Deliberately withhold information**
 - b. Distort information to make it more acceptable**
 - c. Systematically lie to the cult member**
- 2. Minimize or discourage access to non-cult sources of information, including:**
 - a. Internet, TV, radio, books, articles, newspapers, magazines, media**
 - b. Critical information**
 - c. Former members**
 - d. Keep members busy so they don't have time to think and investigate**
 - e. Control through cell phone with texting, calls, internet tracking**
- 3. Compartmentalize information into Outsider vs. Insider doctrines**
 - a. Ensure that information is not freely accessible**
 - b. Control information at different levels and missions within group**
 - c. Allow only leadership to decide who needs to know what and when**
- 4. Encourage spying on other members**
 - a. Impose a buddy system to monitor and control member**
 - b. Report deviant thoughts, feelings and actions to leadership**
 - c. Ensure that individual behavior is monitored by group**

THOUGHT CONTROL

- 1. Require members to internalize the group's doctrine as truth**
 - a. Adopting the group's 'map of reality' as reality**
 - b. Instill black and white thinking**
 - c. Decide between good vs. evil**
 - d. Organize people into us vs. them (insiders vs. outsiders)**
- 2. Use of loaded language and clichés which constrict knowledge, stop critical thoughts and reduce complexities into platitudinous buzz words**
- 3. Encourage only 'good and proper' thoughts**
- 4. Hypnotic techniques are used to alter mental states, undermine critical thinking and even to age regress the member**
- 5. Teaching thought-stopping techniques which shut down reality testing by stopping negative thoughts and allowing only positive thoughts, including:**
 - a. Denial, rationalization, justification, wishful thinking**
 - b. Chanting**
 - c. Meditating**

- d. Praying
- e. Speaking in tongues
- f. Singing or humming
- 6. **Rejection of rational analysis, critical thinking, constructive criticism**
- 7. **Forbid critical questions about leader, doctrine, or policy allowed**
- 8. **Labeling alternative belief systems as illegitimate, evil, or not useful**
- 9. **Instill new “map of reality”**

EMOTIONAL CONTROL

- 1. **Manipulate and narrow the range of feelings – some emotions and/or needs are deemed as evil, wrong or selfish**
- 2. **Teach emotion-stopping techniques to block feelings of homesickness, anger, doubt**
- 3. **Make the person feel that problems are always their own fault, never the leader’s or the group’s fault**
- 4. **Promote feelings of guilt or unworthiness, such as:**
 - a. Identity guilt
 - b. You are not living up to your potential
 - c. Your family is deficient
 - d. Your past is suspect
 - e. Your affiliations are unwise
 - f. Your thoughts, feelings, actions are irrelevant or selfish
 - g. Social guilt
 - h. Historical guilt
- 5. **Instill fear, such as fear of:**
 - a. Thinking independently
 - b. The outside world
 - c. Enemies
 - d. Losing one’s salvation
 - e. Leaving or being shunned by the group
 - f. Other’s disapproval
- 6. **Extremes of emotional highs and lows – love bombing and praise one moment and then declaring you are horrible sinner**
- 7. **Ritualistic and sometimes public confession of sins**
- 8. **Phobia indoctrination: inculcating irrational fears about leaving the group or questioning the leader’s authority**
 - a. No happiness or fulfillment possible outside of the group
 - b. Terrible consequences if you leave: hell, demon possession, incurable diseases, accidents, suicide, insanity, 10,000 reincarnations, etc.

- c. Shunning of those who leave; fear of being rejected by friends and family**
- d. Never a legitimate reason to leave; those who leave are weak, undisciplined, unspiritual, worldly, brainwashed by family or counselor, or seduced by money, sex, or rock and roll**