

## FBI investigating Two by Twos for historical child sexual abuse claims, including in Australia

By [Tobi Loftus](#)

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Lisa Smith was 10 when her dad, a leader within a fundamentalist Christian sect, began to abuse her. *(Supplied)*

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has launched an international investigation into child sexual abuse within a secretive Christian sect that has followers throughout Australia.

The global fundamentalist sect does not have an official name. It is referred to by believers as The Truth or The Way, or by non-believers as the Two by Twos, or the Church with No Name.

**WARNING: This story contains details that may be distressing to some readers.**

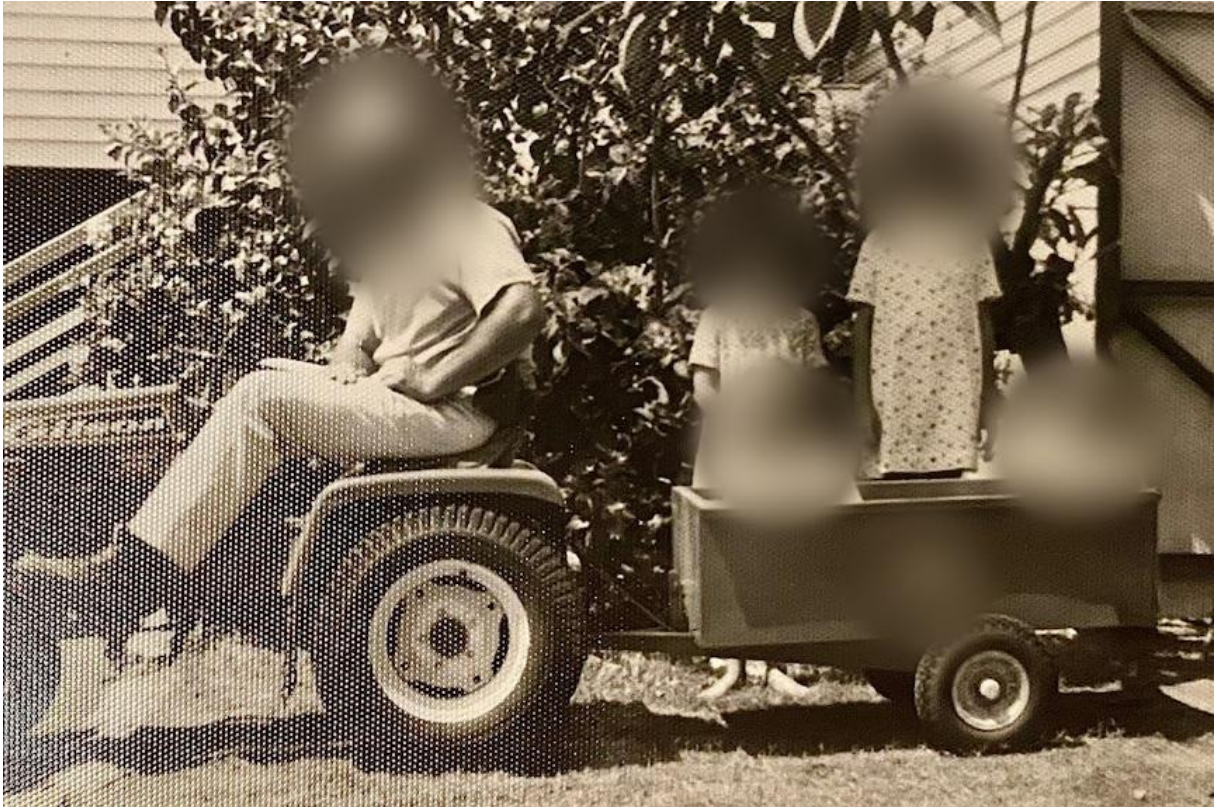
Believers of the church meet in people's homes for prayer sessions, with the group's ministers moving between the different cities and countries where followers are based.

In February in the United States, the FBI launched a probe into the group after widescale reports of abuse were [publicised by the BBC](#) earlier this year.

A hotline for former members who have experienced sexual abuse within the sect in Australia and New Zealand has received allegations involving about 130 separate people.

### Victim wants to be heard

Lisa Smith clearly remembers the moment her dad, a member of the sect, began to sexually assault her.



A young Lisa, pictured with her sister, brothers and father. *(Supplied)*

Lisa is not her real name. The ABC has chosen not to identify her for legal reasons.

She was 10 years old and living in Brisbane when the abuse began.

**Sexual assault support lines:**

- [1800 Respect National Helpline](#): 1800 737 732
- [Men's Referral Service](#): 1300 766 491
- [Lifeline](#) (24-hour crisis line): 131 114
- [Victims of Crime Helpline](#): 1800 819 817
- [Full Stop Australia](#): 1800 385 578

"I was the only one in my bedroom. Dad came in and said, 'I need to check if you're developing properly,'" Ms Smith said.

"I had no clue what he was talking about. I knew nothing about my body, about periods, about sex. We were so sheltered."

Now 55 years old, the personal horrors she experienced remain strong memories.

Ms Smith said the assaults by her father continued daily until she was about 15.





A young Lisa Smith with her brothers. *(Supplied)*

Over subsequent years she disclosed the abuse to various members of the sect but was often told to "forgive and forget" and pray. She left the sect in 2014.

Ms Smith said her father, who was considered a local bishop, continued to be part of fellowships until he was sent to prison.

He pleaded guilty in the Queensland District Court during 2020 to seven charges of indecent treatment of girls under 14 and was handed a three-year prison sentence, suspended after four months.

"Unless you can wipe my memory, it's not going to go away," Ms Smith said.

### **Hotline provides support**

Jillian Hishon runs a hotline called [The Brave Truth](#), which connects former members who have experienced sexual abuse within the sect in Australia and New Zealand to support services.

Since its launch a year ago, she estimated about 100 alleged victims had contacted the hotline, reporting about 130 separate people.

Ms Hishon grew up in the sect around the Toowoomba region but left in October 2011 after Queensland leadership did not approve of her marriage because her husband was not a part of the sect.



Jillian Hishon runs The Brave Truth hotline. *(ABC News: Tobi Loftus)*

She said some of the alleged offences reported to the hotline dated back 80 years.

"Not everybody wants their report to go through the court system. Not everyone wants it on a police database," Ms Hishon said.

"Sometimes they ring so someone will believe them and hear their story."

The hotline is similar to one set up in the United States called Advocates for The Truth, which the BBC recently revealed had received complaints against 700 individuals in the sect.

"It's not a church full of paedophiles and awful people. There are so many good people that have now been caught up in this horrible, horrible situation," Ms Hishon said.



The sect holds yearly conventions on properties around Australia, with large tents for prayer sessions. *(Supplied)*

### **Group 'truly sorry' for 'historic cases'**

In a joint statement, the sect's Australian leaders Malcolm Clapham, Graeme Dalton, Wayne Dean, Trevor Joll, Alan Mitchell, Steven Thorpe, who are based across several states, told the ABC they took allegations of child sexual abuse seriously.

"We are aware of some historic cases where individuals who were respected within the fellowship abused people's trust," they said.

"We acknowledge that these matters were not always appropriately addressed in the past, and we are truly sorry for any immeasurable long-term damage to victims.

"We have learnt from these experiences and are constantly reviewing our current practices to keep children safe in our fellowship."

They said their intention is to partner with an expert external organisation to review their "policies and procedures and provide independent, unbiased advice and recommendations, particularly in relation to dealing with allegations received from third parties where information can be lacking and difficult to substantiate".

### **What is 'The Truth'?**

The sect was established in Ireland during the late 1800s by Scottish evangelist William Irvine, with the belief system quickly spreading around the world.

It is estimated there are about 100,000 believers worldwide, the majority in the United States.

There are roughly 8,000 followers in Australia.





Believers meet yearly at convention sites like this to pray and learn about the sect's beliefs. *(Supplied)*

The sect strictly follows teachings of the New Testament and believers shun modern media, such as like television, films, and books. They wear conservative clothing and women keep hair long.

Documents seen by the ABC show the group has minsters, known as workers, in most parts of the country except the Northern Territory.

In the towns where the group operates, multiple prayer sessions are held each week in followers' homes.

They are officiated by the workers who travel in groups of two and often live with followers and their families.

Every year, special conventions are held in larger districts. In Queensland, conventions are held in areas like Toowoomba, Brisbane and Mackay.

At these conventions, followers stay in dormitories for several days and hold prayer meetings and services in large festival-style tents.



Parts of the convention site are turned into communal dining areas.*(Supplied)*

### **'Homestays increase risk'**

Ms Hishon said she believed Toowoomba, in Queensland's Darling Downs region, was a major centre for the sect in Australia.

She said there were many reasons she believed child sexual abuse flourished in the sect, but most prominently it was because of its secretive, strict nature and the encouragement for followers to have a blind trust in its authority.

"They say they are the one true way ... there's that level of trust that you think you can trust anybody in the church, but that's not the case," Ms Hishon said.

She said most of the sect's followers are born into it and the number of converts was extremely low.



Jillian Hishon says The Brave Truth has spoken with over 100 people who allege they have been abused. *(ABC News: Tobi Loftus)*

The sect's workers give up their jobs and possessions to travel around the world spreading the gospel.

Ms Hishon said workers regularly stayed in families' homes where there could often be children.

She wanted those in the sect to understand the extent of the problem so real changes could be made.

"Is that something you want to accept, in a place where you want to be meeting with God?," Ms Hishon said.

### **'Response not good enough'**

Rachel lives in regional Queensland. She spent her life travelling around the world hosting fellowship meetings in countries like Hungary.

Rachel has asked for her surname to be withheld, to protect her employment.





Rachel was a former minister in the church and left after she reported bullying and it was ignored. *(ABC News: Lucy Loram)*

She claims she was fired from her role after reporting bullying allegations — stemming from experiences she endured in Hungary — and raising concerns about child sexual abuse.

"I had people in my area that I was working with that were adult victim survivors of child sexual abuse. They made disclosures to me and chatted with me to their concerns," Rachel said.

"I conveyed this to senior ministers, and they didn't ever respond. They didn't acknowledge or address it at all.

"But I think they kind of upped the ante as far as hammering me and not giving me any support."

The ABC has spoken with several women across Australia who allege they were sexually assaulted as children while a part of the sect.

Many did not want to be identified.

### **Control exposes victims**

Charlie Blundell's family has been in the sect for several generations, with some family members holding senior leadership positions in Queensland.



Charlie Blundell grew up in the sect, which she personally refers to as a "cult".(ABC News: *Russel Talbot*)

Her great grandmother gave a piece of land near Mackay to the sect to be used for hosting annual conventions.

The land is owned by followers of the sect, with the owners generally living on the properties. It holds several buildings that are used for dormitories and kitchens when the yearly conventions are held.

Now 50 years old, the Gladstone resident said she was sexually abused when she was a toddler by someone who had since died.

"[That was] the minor part of the abuse," Ms Blundell said.

"The physical and emotional abuse had far more detrimental effects in my adult life than the sexual abuse."



Charlie Blundell's family holds senior leadership positions within the sect in Queensland.*(Supplied)*

Ms Blundell said she felt her life was controlled from a very early age and she was not able to embrace her life, and what she wanted to do with it, because she was expected to become "a wife and a mother".

"The control is really around using fear to control basically your behaviours ... to make sure that you fit in and conform to [their] expectations," she said.

"Most women don't have their own bank accounts or have a very limited education in my generation."

She left the sect in 2017 and is among a number of survivors in Australia making submissions to the FBI investigation.

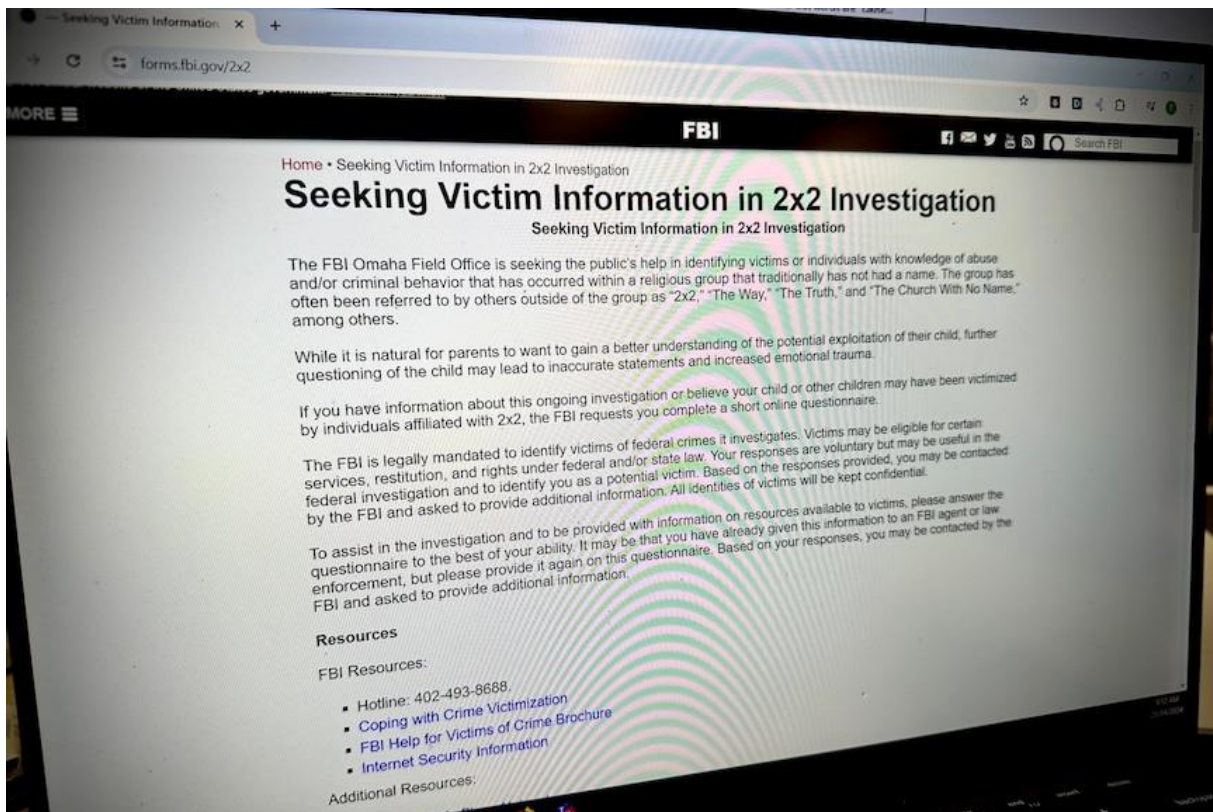
### **FBI investigation ongoing**

An FBI spokesperson confirmed to the ABC an investigation was underway and it was seeking the "the public's help in identifying potential victims".

"In order to preserve the integrity and capabilities of the investigation, I cannot share any details of the ongoing process," the spokesperson said.

According to the FBI's website, it is "seeking the public's help in identifying victims or individuals with knowledge of abuse and/or criminal behaviour that has occurred within a religious group that traditionally has not had a name".





An FBI webpage asks victims of abuse within the Two by Twos to come forward. (ABC News: Tobi Loftus)

The sect's Australian leaders said they had a "zero-tolerance" to "any child being harmed" and would "cooperate fully" with the FBI or other law enforcement if contacted.

"Any allegations are dealt with according to the law and reported to the police. Anyone with allegations against them is stood down pending investigation," they said.

"Perpetrators are not permitted to attend gatherings arranged by the ministry. All workers undertake formal and refresher training in keeping children safe.

"Police checks and working with children checks are required for all workers, and we require all workers to review and sign a code of conduct.

"Reporting of child sexual abuse is actively encouraged. Police investigations are cooperated with fully."

### **Speaking up for justice**

For Lisa Smith, she hopes by speaking up she will be able to bring justice to victims who are yet to see it.

When her father pleaded guilty to her abuse, she wrote a victim impact statement that was filed to the court.



Lisa said what happened to her when she was young still haunts her to this day. *(Supplied)*

"Your actions have impacted pretty much every aspect of my life," she wrote.

"When I was pregnant, I feared having a girl. What would I do if she was touched inappropriately?"

"I do want you to know you f\*\*\*ed my life up pretty well and affected it in so many ways, and you still do, but I'm not going to let you rule me any longer."

It is unknown if her father is still a part of the sect.

Ms Hishon said she understood there had also been several other court cases in Australia where offenders who were members of the sect had been jailed.