

Why We Must Expose the Language That Enables Abuse in the 2x2 Church

This Substack article was written by Alissa Klenk and is posted with her permission. WINGS found it to be instructive and valuable, particularly because it is directly connected to the F&W church and related to CSA and other abuses.

<https://alissaklenk.substack.com/p/reading-between-the-lines?r=1egs8y&triedRedirect=true>



With every evasive letter released by overseers (and nearly every worker), I am disgusted by the lack of transparency and the use of carefully sanitized and vague language. This was one of the first things that I began to notice when the crisis began to unfold, and I have paid special attention to it since then.

I would say that these letters are carefully worded to avoid accountability, but I don't think it takes much effort to write in this style because it's so embedded in the 2x2 church culture. I don't think anyone even realizes what they're doing. It has become "group speak," if you will.

These language phenomena are not restricted to letter writing. It's the preaching style of most 2x2 church workers, too.

So what exactly is wrong with the language used in these communications? And why does it matter?

Let's break it down.

Passive Word Choice

The first red flag for me was the use of passive language in letters from overseers. As a quick overview, passive language (or passive voice) is a grammatical construction where the sentence's subject receives the action rather than doing the action.

Here's a simple example of passive vs. active language:

Passive: The letter was written by Larry.

Active: Larry wrote the letter.

Sometimes passive language is okay, like when we don't know who did something. But in serious situations, like the crisis we're in, passive language hides essential information. The language is neutral, obscures responsibility, and is insincere when discussing accountability. It makes problems seem less urgent or smaller, and can unintentionally (or intentionally) silence victims to protect the system.

Here are a few examples taken out of actual letters from the ministry:

1. "...it has been decided that..."

Let's Analyze:

Who decided it? It's hiding relevant information and leaves readers guessing. Not naming the decision-makers makes it seem like no one is accountable.

Active Voice Rewrite Idea:

Barry and Ray have [insert action here], in consultation with [relevant group or authority].

2. "...CSA and SA cases that have surfaced..."

Let's Analyze:

The word choice of "have surfaced" makes it sound like these cases just randomly appeared. Abuse cases don't just surface. The truth is, overseers have known about abuse for decades. This also downplays the courage it takes for victims to come forward and minimizes institutional responsibility.

Active Voice Rewrite Idea:

Brave survivors have come forward to report the perpetrators of child sexual abuse.

3. "There is ongoing work to continue to help in these matters."

Let's Analyze:

Who is doing the work? What work is being done? What does help mean? How are they helping? How long has this work/help been going on? It's extremely vague and offers no accountability. It sounds nice, but says nothing.

Active Voice Rewrite Idea:

The ministry is working with the GRACE organization to develop clear policies that protect children and support survivors of abuse.

4. "It is being dealt with."

Let's Analyze:

What is being dealt with? And who is dealing with it? In situations involving harm or abuse, clarity is essential. Who is taking action and how?

Active Voice Rewrite Idea:

The ministry takes child sexual abuse allegations seriously and reports them immediately to law enforcement.

How to Identify Passive Language:

1. Look for a form of the verb "to be" + past participle

- Examples of "to be": is, was, were, has been, is being, had been, etc.
- Examples of past participles: written, known, made, taken, reported, seen, etc.

The policy was created last year. → Passive

The ministry created the policy last year. → Active

- Ask: Who is doing the action?

2. If it's unclear or missing, it's probably passive.

Mistakes were made. ← Who made them?

The overseer made mistakes. ← Active and clear

3. Try the "by zombies" test

If you can add "by zombies" after the verb and it still makes sense, it's passive.

The cookies were eaten (by zombies). → Passive

Grandma ate the cookies (by zombies). → Not passive

How often do you read a letter from a worker and think, "What did that just say?" and then have to go back and read it again? This is likely the result of their use of vague, unclear, or ambiguous Language.

Unclear and Ambiguous Language

This kind of language allows for wildly different interpretations since it avoids specifics. And that's exactly the point.

Have you ever noticed how some people will never directly address the child sexual abuse within the church, but will instead refer to it as “concerns” or “these matters”?

Even using the words CSA or SA softens the blow of a topic that’s incredibly horrible. Ambiguous language leaves the subject up to interpretation without revealing any facts. It creates the illusion of action, empathy, or leadership without creating any accountability.

Let’s look at some examples.

1. “We are trying to listen, show we care, and comfort those with concerns.”

Let’s Analyze:

On the surface, this language sounds warm and caring, but it doesn’t reveal anything. What are they listening to? How are they showing they care? What is care? What does comfort look like? And what concerns are they speaking of?

Rewrite Idea:

“We are meeting with survivors and connecting them with support through counseling referrals. We are setting up accountability processes and are working with grace to create a policy that protects children from abuse.”

2. “The ministry is united in standing against wrongdoing.”

Let’s Analyze:

Wrongdoing is an awfully sanitized word. What wrongdoing? Child sexual abuse? Coverups? Misconduct? If the language used could be applied equally to lying, theft, or child sexual abuse, it’s too vague to be useful. It mutes the seriousness of the harm.

Rewrite Idea:

“The ministry condemns all forms of child sexual abuse and has implemented a zero-tolerance policy for those who cover it up or fail to report it. The policy outlines accountability processes.”

How to Identify Ambiguous Language:

1. Look for Undefined Words or Concepts

- Words like: "support," "concern," "wrongdoing," "help," "safety," "steps," "care". These all sound good, but without definitions or examples, they can mean anything or nothing.
- Example: “We’re offering support to those affected.”
- Ask: What kind of support? Emotional? Legal? Financial? Counseling?

2. Look for Phrases That Could Apply to Anything

If a phrase could be copied and pasted into 100 different situations and still “fit,” it’s probably ambiguous.

- “The matter is being addressed.” *What matter? How? By whom? When?*
- “We’re committed to doing what’s right.” *What is “right”? Who decides that?*

3. Ask: Could Two People Read This and Understand It Differently?

Ambiguous language allows different audiences to walk away with very different interpretations, which is often the goal when leaders want to appease everyone without offending anyone.

“We continue to stand with victims.”

One reader may think this means financial or legal action. Another may think it just means feeling bad for them.

If it's not clarified, both interpretations “work”—and that's the problem.

4. Look for Emotionally Soothing Words Without Substance

- Words like: “deeply grieved,” “working tirelessly,” “feeling with you,” “striving together,” “from the depths of our heart”.
- These phrases sound heartfelt, but if they aren't connected to real details or actions, they can be emotional filler, meant to calm without informing.

The ministry's use of vague language has continued to erode trust and cause confusion. Read communications twice, maybe even three times, and ask yourself what's actually being said and what are you assuming. This takes practice, especially for those of us who are so used to this vague language.

When leaders speak in euphemistic terms, they are protecting themselves and the system, not the people who have been harmed. This is especially dangerous in spiritual communities.

Spiritual Bypassing

When spiritual language is used, it deflects responsibility, minimizes harm, and allows those in leadership to avoid difficult conversations under the guise of faith, peace, or God's will. This is called spiritual bypassing.

Here are some examples pulled straight from letters from the ministry:

1. “God is cleansing His Kingdom....the falling away must come.”

Let's Analyze:

This is one of the worst statements being made repeatedly from the platform and throughout the friends. This statement takes a horrific situation involving real victims and reframes it as something God is doing to purify the church. The real truth? It's shifting the focus away from the abuse coverups, placing blame on God instead as if it is His divine plan. It's deflection.

Fix:

I don't even think rewrites are necessary in this case, because statements like this shouldn't even be said. Instead, the focus should be on caring for the victims.

2. “I just pray that your heart can find peace again, my dear.”

Let's Analyze:

This was written to me directly after I wrote a letter to sister workers early on, imploring them to speak up for survivors. My concerns for survivors and for the safety of my own child were turned back on me as if I didn't have peace in my heart. It suggests I should move on without addressing the real grief I was feeling and the reasons for it.

Fix:

Don't use thought-stopping clichés that shame people. Instead, acknowledge the depth of pain and think analytically about what has caused these problems and how they can be fixed, rather than attributing it to spiritual failure.

3. "We are praying about guidelines."**Let's Analyze:**

Do we really need to pray about whether or not to protect our children? The statement sounds holy, but prayer should not replace action when it comes to safety.

Fix:

Identify the specific steps to take, such as working with professionals to create safety guidelines.

How to Identify Spiritual Bypassing:**1. Watch for Scripture or God-Talk Replacing Action.**

- Examples: "We're praying about it." "God is in control." "The Lord knows the heart."

These may be sincere, but if they're used instead of naming abuse, addressing harm, or pursuing justice, it's spiritual bypassing.

2. Look for Redirects to "Unity," "Peace," or "Faithfulness."

- Examples: "Let's keep our eyes on Jesus." "We don't want to focus on the negative." "Let's move forward in love."

These phrases shut down hard conversations by making it seem unspiritual to talk about abuse, injustice, or leadership failure. They frame speaking up as a problem, rather than the harm itself.

3. Check if Victims Are Being Silenced in the Name of God.

- Examples: "The Lord is cleansing His people." "This is all in God's plan." "Only God can judge."

These statements minimize abuse, blame victims for "bitterness," and excuse leaders from accountability.

4. Notice if Emotion Is Framed as Lack of Faith

- Examples: "Don't be troubled." "Just trust God." "Bitterness is a sign your heart isn't right."

These kinds of phrases can make people feel ashamed for feeling hurt, angry, or betrayed. They twist real pain into spiritual failure, which is cruel and harmful.

I want to be clear that spiritual language is not the problem. Faith, scripture, and prayer are not the enemy—they are powerful tools of healing and hope. But when they are used to avoid truth, accountability, or justice, they become weapons of silence.

Spiritual bypassing sounds faithful, but it protects the system instead of the people harmed by it. It shifts the conversation away from truth and justice, and back onto obedience, loyalty, or

“God’s plan.” When faith is used as a shield from responsibility, it stops being faith—it becomes spiritual manipulation.

Thought-Terminating Cliches

Thought-terminating cliches sound meaningful on the surface, but are actually used to shut down questions, critical thinking, or emotional responses. They’re often vague, create the illusion of wisdom or spiritual insight, but really, they half the conversation right where it should begin.

Here are a few examples in letters from the ministry:

1. “We care deeply.”

Let’s Analyze:

Statements like these got really old, really quickly for me. I am tired of hearing how much the ministry cares for us. I’d like to see some actions that prove it. “We care deeply,” sounds comforting, but it’s very vague. Why are they using “we” in a letter from an individual? If they say they care, but won’t acknowledge harm, name abusers, or take visible action to support victims, then it’s just a statement with no substance. Statements like these often appear in place of accountability. It’s a blanket statement that prevents follow-up questions.

Rewrite Idea:

“We care deeply—and here’s what we’re doing to show that care: meeting with survivors, funding counseling services, and working with abuse prevention experts.”

2. “Let’s keep our eyes on Jesus.”

Let’s Analyze:

This is a classic spiritual redirect. Of course, we want to focus on Jesus, but when this is said in response to concerns about abuse, it becomes a way to dismiss uncomfortable truths. It implies that addressing harm is a distraction from faith rather than a core part of living it. It pressures people to stay silent “for the sake of unity” or spirituality.

Rewrite Idea:

“As we look to Jesus, the embodiment of truth and justice, we are committed to confronting wrongdoing honestly and caring for the wounded among us by taking the following steps...”

3. “We’re all grieving.”

Let’s Analyze:

This phrase is sometimes used to flatten the emotional experience. Yes, many are grieving—but not all grief is the same. Survivors are grieving betrayal and trauma. Others are grieving the loss of comfort or image. Pretending these are equal creates false unity and silences people who are in deeper pain. It dismisses survivor-specific grief and replaces it with general emotional fog.

Rewrite Idea:

“While many are grieving, we recognize that the grief of survivors is uniquely deep—and we will honor that with action and change.”

Thought-terminating clichés make people feel wrong for asking questions, selfish for wanting clarity, or divisive for expecting justice. They're a verbal smoke screen—sounding good while obscuring the truth.

If it sounds final, but says nothing, that's your clue: it's probably a thought-terminating cliché.

How to Identify Thought-Terminating Cliches:

1. They Shut Down Questions or Disagreement

These phrases are often used when someone raises a valid concern—but instead of engaging, the speaker ends the conversation with a “final” statement.

These aren't always wrong, but in the wrong context, they function as conversation stoppers. They suggest that asking questions or expressing pain is unfaithful, divisive, or unnecessary.

More Examples: “God is in control.” “It's in His hands.” “We're all doing our best.” “Let's not dwell on the negative.”

2. They Redirect Attention Away From the Issue

These can be used to shame people who bring up hard truths, and redirect the conversation back to spiritual performance, unity, or obedience.

More Examples: “Keep your eyes on Jesus.” “Only God can judge.” “Let's focus on moving forward.”

3. They Flatten Complex Emotions or Experiences

These blur the distinction between survivor and abuser, bystanders and enablers, or leaders and victims. They oversimplify what needs to be confronted with nuance and care.

More Examples: “We're all hurting right now.” “We're all just human.” “Mistakes were made.”

4. They Make the Listener Feel Like the Problem

Instead of focusing on the harm done, these clichés shift the burden to the one speaking up—turning their valid concern into a spiritual flaw.

- More examples: “You just need to forgive.” “Don't be bitter.” “Be careful not to gossip.”

When I received several letters in response to my letter to sister workers, I found some common themes amongst them. They relied heavily on personal intentions over institutional transparency, framed internal dialogue and private care as adequate responses to public harm, and implied quiet care was morally superior to visible advocacy.

There's a tendency for the 2x2 church to frame anything done publicly as attention-seeking. This is problematic when we're dealing with child sexual abuse. Institutional change only comes from public and group advocacy, which is probably one of the reasons no real change has been implemented—there's just not enough public support within the group to influence change.

So while the ministry relies on language tactics that are manipulative and unclear, the congregation remains silent. Language is powerful. Recognize how it's being used and call it out. But also, use your voice to effect change and stand for the vulnerable amongst us.

Silence is too costly, especially in the face of language being used harmfully in a situation influenced by spiritual authority, emotional manipulation, and institutional self-protection. Words shape belief. They shape loyalty. They shape what we think we're allowed to question. Don't let vague or spiritualized language silence truth.

Speak clearly. Speak bravely. Speak up.

Author's Note:

For the sake of transparency, I used AI fairly heavily while writing this piece—especially in the sections that define and explain different types of language. It helped with efficiency and structure, but the experiences, observations, and outrage are entirely my own.

On a related note, if you ever find yourself unsure about how a particular phrase or sentence feels or functions, try asking AI! It's surprisingly helpful at analyzing tone, identifying vagueness, and pointing out language that dodges responsibility. Just be sure to ask thoughtful follow-up questions—and trust your gut, too.

And honestly? A few overseers might benefit from running their letters through AI before hitting "send." It won't fix the theology, but at least it might flag the passive voice.