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'It's just thick with abuse': Inside the online reckoning of underground church Two by Twos

'How can there be this many pedophiles in a relatively small church?'



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Trending

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Tava Zahorka Nicholson cannot recall many details of her upbringing. “I did not and still do not remember my childhood to this day, I remember bits and pieces,” she said.

Zahorka Nicholson’s family was part of a largely unknown Christian sect that is currently in the midst of a public reckoning over what some describe as decades of systemic abuse and the unwillingness of church leaders to confront the problem.

Zahorka Nicholson says she is one of the survivors. “Overall, I had pretty cool parents on the outside looking back—especially for cult parents,” she told the Daily Dot in a recent phone conversation, laughing softly.

While Zahorka Nicholson is able to recall the generalities of her childhood, she struggles with specifics.

Zahorka Nicholson said her parents often hosted church gatherings at their home when she was growing up. Everything had to be perfect on the outside looking in, floors vacuumed, house tidied, kids dressed in their best clothing. Zahorka Nicholson felt she had no choice but to participate.

“I know I didn’t like things, but I don’t know if I thought there was an option to not go,” she added.

It wasn’t until she joined a Facebook group for ex-members of the nameless church—which former members refer to as the Two by Twos—that things

started to become clearer for her. Zahorka Nicholson recalled being gripped by terror when others in the group shared their stories of being sexually assaulted by church leaders and members. That terror ultimately led her to a therapist who helped her sift through uncovered childhood memories. She now recalls that she was sexually assaulted as a child by four male members of the church on separate occasions.

“One of them was over 100 times,” she said. “All of this is by recollection as an adult, because I didn’t remember this stuff for years.”

Some believe that the church doesn’t merely conceal the abuse; it fosters a culture that encourages it.

(Disclosure: The author’s family has been involved in the Two by Twos for generations. She has never been a member, but has attended gatherings.)

For this story, the Daily Dot spoke with four people who say they were sexually abused by members of the church, consulted records of members’ and leaders’ arrests and convictions, and interviewed people leading efforts to hold the Two by Twos accountable. A private investigator working on multiple cases told the Daily Dot that hundreds from the church have been accused. Some of the convictions go back decades, yet members say the church continued to allow both those accused and convicted to have access to children at services, meetings, and annual conventions.

Now current and former members are organizing online to hold the church accountable. Meanwhile, the Two by Twos are reportedly grappling with how to deal with the escalating scandal.

Multiple leaders of the church did not respond to requests for comment.

Zahorka Nicholson said that, although multiple people have accused her abusers, none are currently being investigated by police or, as far as she knows, the church.

“I wish I had this wonderful line that took everyone to their knees so that they could grasp the magnitude of this,” Zahorka Nicholson said.

In the shadows of the church with no name

The church was founded in the late 19th century as a home-based religion. While its teachings are based on the Christian Bible, the church has no name,

no clear leadership structure, and no actual churches. Members have been known to simply call it “the truth” or “the way.” It also does not appear to have registered as a nonprofit or a religion in the places where it operates.

The church has strict, antiquated rules about conduct, dress, and even music—instruments are not allowed during worship. Throughout the twentieth century, women and girls wore floor-length dresses and skirts; today the dress code has relaxed somewhat, though they are still expected to dress modestly. Females typically pin their hair back in poofy buns or wear it in a loose braid. Women are also not allowed to wear makeup, nail polish, or jewelry. Many don’t ever cut their hair. Men wear suits, even in the blazing heat, but their dress code is much less stringent than that of females. Like many religions, Two by Twos are patriarchal, with men as head of household and family. Most church leaders are male, and those in the highest positions of power are all men.

It is believed there are currently roughly 75,000 members, though there’s no way to be sure due to the church’s culture of secrecy. Many believe that it saw its highest numbers in the 1980s and that it’s declined around 50% since then.

The faith doesn’t actively pursue bringing in new members; it’s typically passed down from generation to generation. Some believe its insular nature may have kept the allegations from coming to light. The way that churches in different regions are siloed from one another may also play a role.

Heather, who asked that her full name be withheld, is a former member of the church who works for a child welfare agency in Ontario, Canada.

“There is no website or formal identifiable group, which helps it stay underground,” Heather said, her voice crackling through the phone line.

She explained that each state, province, and country is operated by an “overseer” who is almost like the president of that area. The overseer assigns clergy, or “workers,” to go out in pairs of same-gender groups to a particular jurisdiction. Each pair spends a year in their assigned regions—hence the name Two by Twos. Preachers, known as “workers,” are expected to divest all their worldly possessions, not to own cars or homes, and remain celibate.

Clergy conduct services in members’ homes. They move around a lot, staying in each home for a few nights at a time. At the end of the year, the church separates worker pairs and creates new ones, who are then moved to a

different area or even country to live with and minister to the handful or few dozen people from the area who belong to the church.

Survivors say staying with a family gives clergy easy access to children. They further believe that moving ministers around so much helps both them and the church avoid accountability.

Conventions are a rare chance for Two by Twos to meet others in the faith. Conventions may also provide opportunities for abuse.

Every year thousands of Two by Twos gather in rural areas around the world to worship together at these conventions. Each regional gathering is usually attended by a few hundred people. Members, who are called “friends” in church parlance, camp in tents and trailers, eat together, play together, and spend multiple days as a group.

Private investigator Cynthia Liles, who specializes in child sex abuse and sex assault cases, is working on multiple cases involving members and former members of the Two by Twos. Liles told the Daily Dot that over 1,000 people have identified 550 alleged perpetrators.

Liles said that, while the overwhelming majority of the people say they were targeted within their homes, roughly 20% purportedly occurred during conventions.

A former minister from the church, who was later convicted of sexually abusing a child, said that he is among the victims.

“I was molested at a church convention when I was 10,” Richard Schober told the Daily Dot.

Casting out the darkness

Kari Hanks is one of four people who run the Ex-2×2 Support Group, a closed Facebook group that Tava Zahorka Nicholson and many other survivors, advocates, current members, and ex-members belong to.

Hanks, her husband Kyle, and another couple who also formerly belonged to the Two by Twos, Abbi and Mike Prussack, started the group in January 2022.

“I wanted to start a support group for people who have left meetings, to feel safe and find community, to share their stories,” Hanks told the Daily Dot.

At first, new members trickled in. The number of people asking to join skyrocketed after Hanks released a letter she was never supposed to read.

In March, overseers reportedly called multiple secret meetings throughout Canada and the United States. In one of those meetings, a group was handed a printed letter and asked to review it then quickly pass it back. They were not supposed to keep or photograph the letter.

The letter, dated March 20, details the alleged secret life of a powerful and well-respected overseer in Oregon named Dean Bruer. Bruer was found dead in June 2022. According to the letter, there was incriminating evidence on his laptop and phone.

“His actions include rape and other abuse of underage-victims.

He *totally* abused his authority as an overseer in order to control, manipulate and threaten his victims.” the letter said. “None of us had any idea that such terrible things were happening until several weeks after his death. There is no possible way that this would not have been immediately reported had we known.”

March 20, 2023
Our Dear Friends,

It is with a very heavy heart we share the following difficult information, but we feel it is imperative that we do so. We trust you will understand and be in agreement.

We have come to the tragic conclusion that Dean Bruer had another side to his life that none of us, except victims, ever witnessed or suspected. It has come to the surface in recent months, and more so in recent weeks, that **Dean was a sexual predator**. We never respect or defend such totally inappropriate behavior among us. There is a very united consensus among us that the only thing to do is to be transparent with all of you for obvious reasons, though this is very difficult. We are very sorry for the hurt this will bring to the hearts of many. Thankfully, he is no longer in a position to hurt anyone.

Some things have come to light from Dean's own records. Dean had his own Best Western Hotel preferred customer account and spent a considerable amount of time and money in motels. As we all know, when he died last June, it was in a motel in Government Camp, OR, a place that he frequented. The receipts often included "two guests". Victims have come forward, and there was very confirming and incriminating evidence found on his computer and phone.

His actions include rape and abuse of underage victims. He totally abused his authority as an overseer in order to control, manipulate and threaten his victims. We are strongly recommending our staff look at the Ministry Safe Program and possibly other venues that help understand, recognize, and prevent such problems.

Overwhelmingly, our greatest concern in all of this is the victims, known and unknown. We do hope and pray this message somehow reaches the ears of every unknown victim if there are more. We feel very anxious to assure them that we are anxious to do everything possible to be a support. We understand that people like this are dangerously equipped to twist what has happened in such a way that the victim feels it's their fault, and thereby the predator's criminal behavior is hidden from others. We assure you, there is no possibility anyone will lay blame, except at the feet of the ONE very wrong man who has caused your pain. We are sorry! We hope you will have courage to reach out to any of us, or anyone that you feel you can talk to. We understand your need for privacy as well as support working through this, and we all intend to respect that.

None of us had any idea that such terrible things were happening until several weeks after his death. There is no possible way that this would not have been immediately reported had we known. Some of us very much regret that we didn't somehow discover his actions and prevent more pain. We all feel betrayed naturally. We have come to the conclusion that the very dangerous thing about people like him is that they do what they do without conscience, thus it's much easier for them to pretend to be something that they aren't. We cannot live a lie when we love truth, and honestly live before God, respecting His approval as the scripture teaches us.

We sang recently, "All through the storm I see thy face beaming with love and with saving grace." Our desperate prayer for you all, especially anyone that has been hurt, is that God will show Himself very strong. In Mark 4, the disciples found themselves in the worst storm of their life which caused a lot of distress. But at the conclusion of the storm there was a greater appreciation than ever for the miracle capacity Jesus had to deliver perfect peace despite storms. Our hearts desperately ache for the disappointment and sense of betrayal this will bring to countless hearts and again especially for the pain inflicted to victims. We pray the miracle somehow, someday, will be as great as it was in Mark 4 for all.

Keep close to God dear friends. There is an immense capacity in the hand of God to help us. Thank you for all the prayers we know this will generate!

Sincerely your brother

A letter about abuse by a church leader that circulated among members in March

It's not clear exactly what was on his devices and the Daily Dot did not find any record of criminal charges against Bruer. According to a website that aggregates stories of alleged victims and ongoing cases, local law enforcement opened an investigation into the matter. The Daily Dot confirmed with law enforcement that there is a case file.

The overseer whose name appears on the letter did not respond to an email seeking comment.

Although the letter was never meant to be seen outside the room, one person secretly took a photo which eventually made its way to Hanks. After some deliberations with the other admins of the Ex-2×2 Support Group, Hanks shared the letter there and on her Facebook page.

“The letter was a shock to everyone in the community because Dean Bruer had been this really upstanding minister,” said Hanks. Bruer had spent over 40 years in the ministry.

The Facebook group has grown rapidly since they shared the letter. As of March, it had 900 members. Today, there are roughly 3,000.

The letter also inspired other people to come forward with allegations of abuse by different leaders and members of the church. A few days after it leaked, multiple people accused an overseer in the United States of child sex abuse. He stepped down shortly thereafter.

The overseer declined to comment in a phone conversation with the Daily Dot.

From there, the floodgates opened.

Throughout April and May, the Ex-2×2 Support Group said they heard between 12 and 15 stories from people who claim to be victims every day. Many of these stories involve child sexual abuse, said Hanks.

The Ex-2×2 Support Group isn’t the only group that has popped up amidst these allegations. Advocates for the Truth runs a Facebook group, website, and offers a hotline for survivors. The website includes a list of nine cases in the United States and Canada it says are currently active. Liles, the private investigator who is working on multiple cases involving the Two by Twos, helps run the Advocates for the Truth group and set up the hotline in late March after the Dean Bruer letter leaked.

Liles told the Daily Dot that she’s working on numerous criminal cases with a number of law enforcement agencies, including local, state, federal, and international. Due to the ongoing investigations, she declined to identify any of the alleged perpetrators.

According to Liles and former members of the Two by Twos, the sect’s reluctance to start a website, or maintain any type of trackable online presence has made it incredibly difficult to distribute key information about possible

abuse. Many also claim that church leaders haven't notified members of credible sexual abuse allegations against members and clergy. Instead, they say, it simply moves accused ministers to a new locale, or informs a handful of people, rather than making the allegations more widely known.

"The workers know about a ton of these cases, almost all of them honestly," said Liles. She said many victims who called the hotline confirmed that Two by Twos leadership was notified of the abuse, often at the time it occurred.

But there's never been a reckoning until now. Whistleblowers and others working to expose the Two by Twos are using the internet to spread information about accusations against current and former members and leaders. Multiple sources told the Daily Dot that church leaders have reacted by telling congregants that there simply is no issue to be concerned about. The Daily Dot obtained an email a church leader reportedly sent to members which downplayed the scandal. "We have just finished a most wonderful convention season. Our Lord has been so good to us," it said. "Perhaps some would have felt there was a 'crisis' in the kingdom but that is not happening. This is God's kingdom and everything is very much under His control."

Efforts to expose the matter and share information about it are stymied by members' reluctance to embrace technology. Many people in the religion still don't have televisions or listen to secular music. Using the internet, however, appears to have become somewhat more common.

Still, the barrier between the online world and the insular world created by the Two by Twos' culture has made it difficult for word of allegations of sexual misconduct to spread more widely.

Even as more evidence has become public, the church reportedly continues to operate much the same as it always has. Both Hanks and Liles said that convicted sexual predators have attended services and meetings in the recent past, however, they could not confirm whether they are still allowed to attend. Liles also said that a man who was convicted of first-degree statutory sodomy and first-degree child molestation of victims aged seven and nine years old, for which he was sentenced to 10 years in prison in 2006, has been attending in-person meetings. In an email obtained by the Daily Dot, a church leader confirmed that he is allowed to attend meetings, but said no minors are present.

The secrecy is sparking growing concerns among current and former members.

Kari Hanks said that she and her family, which includes minor children, attended monthly Sunday meetings with Jason Lennox from 2012 to 2015. Lennox moved away from the area shortly before he was arrested. Hanks was never informed that Lennox was subsequently convicted of multiple counts of sexual assault of a minor, for which he received a 15-year prison sentence. The Pima County Attorney's Office confirmed that Lennox was found guilty of three counts of continuous sexual abuse of a child. The abuse reportedly occurred between 2007 and 2011.

Hanks learned about Lennox's case in April, five years after he was convicted.

Leaders came under fire again when it was discovered that the current overseer of Kentucky and Tennessee, Jerome Frandle, was charged with failing to report child sexual assault in 2012 when he was the overseer of Michigan.

According to court records, Frandle claimed that the law didn't apply because the church isn't an actual denomination or organization because it doesn't have a formal name and it isn't registered with the government. He claimed they are simply followers of Jesus. As such, Frandle argued that he could not be held responsible for failing to report alleged abuse because there is no organization or leadership structure, essentially arguing that his role as an overseer held no power.

The files do not indicate whether Frandle was convicted. The clerk of the court told the Daily Dot that they could not provide any information about the case. The clerk said records of the case are not public.

Neither Frandle nor his attorney responded to request for comment.

A transcript from a hearing in the case references an incident that occurred between a preacher Darren Briggs and a child from the church. Michigan court records show that Briggs was convicted of sexually assaulting a child in 2010.

Media coverage of the case and records available online say Briggs was a preacher at a non-denominational church and was staying with the child's family at the time.

The Daily Dot left a message seeking comment at a phone number that purportedly belongs to Briggs. As of publication, Briggs had not responded.

Current and former members continue unearthing secrets that the Two by Twos have long kept buried.

Rumors about former minister Richard Schober go back to the 1960s. He says he did nothing wrong and voluntarily stepped away from the ministry because he knew he had a problem.

“I knew I had a problem and I stepped out because it was not the place for me to be in the homes of children,” Schober said in a phone conversation with the Daily Dot.

Washington state records show that in 1982, Schober was convicted of indecent liberties and was sentenced to five years in prison. Court records obtained by the Daily Dot state that the judgment prohibited him from being around minor children without adult supervision.

“I molest my daughter one time. One time. And my wife told me, because she knew there was another incident or so, ‘You touch my daughter, I leave.’ I did and she left,” Schober said of his conviction. “...I’d struggled with this for 25 years.”

He said he was arrested the next day.

Records show that Schober violated the terms of his sentence by refusing to complete the Sexual Offender Program.

Schober said that the violation stemmed from a child being present at a church meeting he was allowed to attend, which he voluntarily reported. He said that, rather than start the program all over again, he opted to go back to court.

“I went back to court and the judge could release me, but there was someone there who said my parents wouldn’t be a good check and balance for me in the community ... so I went to prison for 15 months,” he said.

In 2014, Schober was living in Alaska and once again attending church services.

Jennifer Ford told the Daily Dot that members in the area were originally notified that Schober would not be allowed to attend meetings with children, among other restrictions. In September 2022, Ford, who has 11 children, seven

of whom attend services with her, was asked to attend an in-home meeting that Schober was also attending.

Schober also confirmed that he was not supposed to attend meetings with children. When asked why he was put into a meeting with the Ford family, Schober said, “I think it’s a mistake the minister made,” adding that he accepts accountability for it.

The Daily Dot obtained an audio recording from a meeting that purportedly took place between Ford, her husband, Schober, and three other men identified as church leaders. During the meeting, Ford said that her children had told her he made them uncomfortable. “You agreed to not initiate contact,” Ford said to Schober. He replied, “I did not say that... I promised you—in tears, that I would not touch your children inappropriately. I have not done that. If shaking hands with your children is inappropriate....”

Ford told the Daily Dot that Schober said he’d completed the sex offender treatment ordered by the court and was “counseling others” by the time it ended.

“I found out by the court records he refused to do the treatment,” she said.

When Ford asked church leaders to move their family back to the service they’d previously attended, she said they refused.

“Part of the agreement... was that Schober told us that he didn’t socialize at all after meeting, even with the adults,” Ford said. She feels that Schober breached the boundaries that he agreed to, yet the church didn’t support Ford or find a solution that would make her feel safe.

Ford tried to get a restraining order against Schober, but the judge ruled against it, decreeing she was simply afraid of his past crimes. Schober told the Daily Dot that he is no longer allowed to attend church in person.

Schober also insists that he is completely reformed. “I’m grateful today that I’m still a free man and I’ve earned it. I’ve paid the price over and over again. And I’m still paying,” he said.

The general consensus from former members is that the overseers and workers are not doing enough to address the accusations, particularly those of women

and children. Schober disagrees. “This is a crisis around the world and they’re dealing with it,” he said.

As a professional working for a child welfare agency, Heather offered “Duty to Report” presentations to local members of the sect where she educates people about how to report suspected child abuse and what to look for. In July, a church leader asked her to put on a more formal training about the same subject matter sanctioned by the region. Nevertheless, the leader of the region has not been open about the allegations and the church’s efforts to address them.

The church maintains a tight hold over members, including people who say they were sexually abused by leaders and members.

People are increasingly turning to the growing grassroots initiatives led by former and current members of the Two by Twos, which is helping them feel seen and heard. There’s a growing consensus among them that the church has spent years sweeping systemic sexual abuse under the rug. There’s also a sense that the reckoning has only begun.

“I think it’s beyond our imagination,” Liles said, adding, “We’re at the tip of the iceberg right now. It’s just thick with abuse.” She paused.

“My big question is: How can there be this many pedophiles in a relatively small church?”

<https://www.dailydot.com/news/underground-church-two-by-twos/>

They reap what they have sown. Teach willful ignorance, moral blindness sets in. Promote vanity (under cover of piety) and narcissistic sense of exclusive entitlement follows. Kierkegaard’s “religious life” gets distorted and abused, “dangerous waters” indeed too few enter with requisite “fear and trembling.”

I have moved intimately in inner leadership circles of this sect/cult. Cults by definition have a charismatic overbearing leader who promotes flamboyant practices in the membership; sects tend to not have such a leader but have a similar insularity setting themselves up as distinct and separate from “the world” around them privy to superior knowledge. The Two by Two’s appear sect-like by diffusing the leadership amongst overseers and elders, but otherwise they operate as a cult. (An eccentric more-intellectual worker once raised the question with me whether “we” were a sect or a cult. He thought “sect.”) The mindset is the same. All who have had lengthy involvement in meetings and “professing” learn, painfully, when they leave, that they were members of a cult.

Hospitable as “Friends” can be with outsiders—there is a wholesomeness possible where humility, modesty, and clean living are cultivated—when amongst themselves they indulge their vanities. 2x2’s believe they are the one true religion/faith in the world, the Way, the Truth, and the Life faithful to the original teachings of Jesus in an unbroken chain through history. (Some have a more nuanced view of that line of succession, but still think it is the only one.) They believe in the “literal” truth of Scripture—even if they never really grasp what this would mean if they did—adding a dispensationalist twist to this to explain what Gospel things “The Way” lacks (e.g., healing, miracles, Pentecostal dramatics like speaking in tongues). Much as they treasure Paul’s epistles, they tend to speak of and pray to “Jesus” instead of “Christ,” even if the latter is integral to Paul’s preaching and theology. (I have yet to figure this out: To me, *Yeshua/Iesous*/Jesus is supposed to lead to, become *Chrestos*/Christ. But maybe workers don’t want their flock to imagine themselves empowered to that degree.) Celibacy, divesting oneself of worldly goods, being itinerant in pairs, a “church” being a congregation not a building, no formal administration in an office material or legal, are all designed to make “workers” and “Way” look different and authentic. The more people make such increasingly onerous and defining sacrifices, the more entitled they feel to assert their “special calling”; and the more they have invested in it, ego and career-wise, other options (marriage, children, self-directed agency, pleasures) foregone, the more they resist changes and challenges to the status quo they have made their own.

A former worker I know preached for 16 years that The Way is “simplistic.” When I pointed out that she meant “simple” the implications of this never registered. But the doctrine/theology maintained goes beyond being simplistic into the realm of willfully stupid. (Of course, a verse can be employed to cover this: “... But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise ...”). If they were to recognize how flawed, stunted, and “human” their (to be charitable, rarified and idealized) conception of their “perfect Way” actually is, no obfuscations or circumlocutions allowed—to realize they are in fact no different from, or better than, all the other “churches” and ministers out there, and maybe worse for claiming to be superior while “cheating” in their “faith”—they would not secretly adjudicate their worst transgressors, cover up crimes, and suppress victims. Sexual abuse of children by members would be recognized as the deviantly “human” crime that it is, committed by human beings as fallible as any, however “heroic”; they would admit they are incapable of understanding such psychopathology and judging safety in such matters; and they would set an example in submitting to “the law” especially when it is right and the crime committed egregious. These “servants of the Lord” would realize they have instead made themselves the Devil’s playthings; the Devil must chuckle himself to sleep at night enjoying the havoc he wreaks in religion. The only “good” they have done is to make shockingly clear the error of their ways. Will they learn? You know the answer so abjectly and wrongly human. TJB