

BROKEN FAITH

**Inside the
Word of Faith Fellowship,
One of America's Most
Dangerous Cults**

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

THE CHURCH

Jane Whaley: The unquestioned leader of the Word of Faith Fellowship, Whaley believes she's a prophet who holds the key to eternal salvation. A former math teacher, Whaley and her top ministers control all aspects of congregants' lives, from where they live to when they can get married and have sex.

Sam Whaley: The cofounder of the Word of Faith Fellowship, Whaley was a former used car salesman from Florence, South Carolina, who faded into the background once his wife took control of the church.

Brooke Covington: The daughter of wealthy Kansas farmers, she was an early disciple and is now one of Jane Whaley's closest confidantes. She was one of five people charged with kidnapping and assault in the beating of Matthew Fenner, a congregant who says he was attacked to expel his "homosexual demons."

Kent Covington: After spending eight months in a North Carolina prison in the 1970s, he found his way to the Word of Faith Fellowship. He married Brooke Covington and rose in the church hierarchy.

Mark Doyle: His journey to the Word of Faith Fellowship began after hearing God's voice at an AC/DC concert. A stickler for the rules, Doyle was a minister assigned to keep children in line and in the fold.

Mark Morris: An attorney and minister, Morris was in charge of the dreaded Lower Building—a structure that former congregants say was used as a de facto prison.

Ray Farmer: A minister, business owner, and the head of the church's security team, Farmer may be the most feared member of the Word of Faith Fellowship behind Jane Whaley. Former members say he has elaborate surveillance equipment and carries assault-style weapons in the back of his SUV.

Joshua Farmer: Ray Farmer's son, Josh Farmer, is an attorney who owns several businesses. His trucking company is one of a handful in the world certified to transport deadly potassium cyanide, which is used in the mining industry.

THE VICTIMS

Rick Cooper: After serving on a United States Navy nuclear submarine, Rick joined the Word of Faith Fellowship in 1993 to attend Bible school. He had hoped to eventually start his own church. But he would later regret uprooting his family from Darien, Georgia, to Spindale, North Carolina.

Suzanne Cooper: The matriarch of the Cooper family, she led two of her sisters into the church. Hoping to stay in Jane

Whaley's good graces, she turned against one of those sisters in a bitter custody dispute with Kent and Brooke Covington.

John David Cooper: One of Rick and Suzanne's nine children, he was only eighteen months old when his family joined the church. But after nearly two decades of abuse, he became the first of the Coopers to flee.

Jeffrey Cooper: One of John David Cooper's brothers, he became an attorney and accountant. He attended key meetings with other church lawyers as they discussed how to undermine police and child welfare investigations.

Benjamin Cooper: Another of John David Cooper's brothers, he's an attorney and business owner who has dedicated his life to exposing the church in an attempt to save the children left behind.

Shana Muse: One of Suzanne Cooper's three sisters, Muse turned to the Word of Faith Fellowship for help after drugs led to trouble with the law. When she tried to leave, a church couple wrested away her four children.

Wanda Henderson: The mother of Suzanne Cooper and Shana Muse, Henderson was never a member of the church. She watched helplessly as three daughters and more than a dozen grandchildren suffered under Jane Whaley's spell. Affectionately known as "Mama-Gail," she never gave up on her family.

Sarah Anderson: Shana Muse's oldest daughter, Sarah and her siblings were sent to live with Kent and Brooke Covington when their mother tried to leave the church. Those ministers convinced Anderson that her mother was "wicked."

Danielle Cordes: Suzanne Cooper's niece, Danielle suffered brutal abuse at the hands of church leaders. During a child abuse investigation when she was ten years old, Danielle always wore her favorite dress for interviews with social workers. Like an orphan auditioning for a family, she had hoped they'd take her with them.

Michael Lowry: Born into the church, he was abused from a young age. After being held twice in the Lower Building, he escaped and told police about widespread abuse inside the church. He also told them he was brutally beaten because he was gay.

Matthew Fenner: When he was nineteen, he was attacked by congregants because they wanted to beat the "homosexual demons" out of him. He spent two years trying to get police to investigate the case, finally leading to charges being filed against five church members, including Brooke Covington and Sarah Anderson.

Jamey Anderson: Escaping the church at the age of eighteen after years of isolation and physical beatings, Jamey eventually put himself through law school and helped others flee the church.

THE ADVOCATES

Robynn Spence: As soon as she was elected Rutherford County Clerk of Courts, she tried to curb the Word of Faith Fellowship's influence inside the courthouse. She refused to renew the contracts of two employees with ties to the Word of Faith Fellowship. Spence also helped members leaving the church. But Spence died in 2014, about a year and a half after a man told her he was hired by a Word of Faith member to kill her because of her opposition to the church.

Nancy Burnette: A former court-appointed advocate, known as a guardian ad litem, Burnette had never heard of the Word of Faith Fellowship until two foster children under her care were sent to live with a couple in the congregation. After visits to the church school and worship services, Burnette opposed placing the foster children with the couple. Instead of taking action, her boss removed her from the case. She has dedicated her life to helping people escape the church.

John Huddle: He left his wife and children behind when he escaped the church in 2008. After surviving a heart attack and cancer, he became one of Word of Faith Fellowship's most outspoken critics, creating a blog to expose the church to the world.

LAW ENFORCEMENT

Prosecutor Brad Greenway: As district attorney, he chose not to pursue a number of child abuse and criminal investigations against the church.

Sheriff Chris Francis: Francis delayed investigating complaints related to the church. He also refused to help Robynn Spence when she was concerned the church was out to harm her.

GLOSSARY

Giving In to the Unclean: A catchall term used for a wide variety of sins, such as having erotic thoughts.

Locked In: Phrase used to remind congregants they needed to get permission from Jane Whaley or others in church leadership before making any decisions, including buying a car or having sex with their spouses.

Open Your Heart: Phrase used by ministers to encourage congregants to disclose their deepest—and often darkest—secrets.

Take Hold: An expression used to warn congregants to shape up, obey what they've been told by church leadership.

Under Authority: A term used to warn congregants to follow Jane Whaley's strict rules and edicts.

Work Projects: Congregants are expected to “volunteer” on their weekends or after work to help with the church's construction projects. It could mean working as a handyman helping to renovate a congregant's home or property owned by church ministers.

Walking Out a Friendship or Walking Out a Relationship: Terms used to signal when a couple has been paired and are now exclusive. They can sit together at church and have lunch together, but their actions are closely watched and they must refrain from anything the church considers unclean.

NOTES ON SOURCES

PROLOGUE

Our account of John David Cooper and his wife fleeing the Word of Faith Fellowship on July 16, 2014, is based on numerous interviews with former members, including John David Cooper; his parents, Rick and Suzanne Cooper; and brothers Benjamin, Jeffrey, and Peter. They said John David Cooper was beaten to expel demons in a practice called “blasting.”

For information about the church’s practices, including blasting and discipleship, we conducted interviews of nearly one hundred former members, including John David Cooper, Rick and Suzanne Cooper, Danielle Cordes, Matthew Fenner, John Huddle, Jamey Anderson, Rachel Bryant, and Sarah Anderson. The former members described how they and others were rebuked from the pulpit, isolated from the outside world, and prohibited from watching television, listening to the radio, reading newspapers, and watching movies. Nearly two dozen former members talked about how they were removed from their families and forced to live with ministers who became their de facto parents.

We also drew on numerous tapes of Jane Whaley sermons from the 1990s as well as court and police documents, including the 1995 State Bureau of Investigation report.

In addition, we gleaned information about the church’s practices from

several custody cases. They include Jane Whaley's 2017 deposition in a custody case involving Sarah Anderson, who left the Word of Faith Fellowship in 2016, and her former husband, Nick Anderson, who was still inside the church.

In her deposition, Whaley said blasting is used to "break the power of Satan. So in the name of Jesus you drive the demons out." She also acknowledged that the church has prohibitions against television, radio, and magazines.

1

We conducted extensive interviews with numerous members of the Cooper family, including Rick and Suzanne Cooper, and extended relatives.

For the section that Whaley is considered a prophet by her followers, we drew on interviews with dozens of former congregants.

For information about the church's practices, we conducted interviews with nearly one hundred former members. We also pulled from police and court documents, and reviewed transcripts of depositions from custody cases involving Word of Faith Fellowship members.

In her 2017 custody-case deposition, Jane Whaley discussed in detail her belief in strong prayer, known as blasting. When an attorney asked Whaley if a "shrill cry" comes "out of you" during blasting, she responded, "Right, it's a cry. It's a shrill cry."

Attorney: "A shrill cry?"

Whaley: "Uh-huh. To prevail against the spirit of darkness that's coming at somebody."

Our account of congregants screaming, convulsing, or vomiting into buckets during such church practices as blasting is based on interviews with numerous former members, as well as John Peter Evans, the Trinity Foundation investigator who infiltrated the church.

The estimate on church membership and physical description of the compound is based on interviews with numerous people who attended the church at various times since its founding. Jane Whaley also gave *AP* reporter Mitch Weiss a tour of the church on February 8, 2013.

Our account of Jane Whaley scolding Suzanne Cooper for her daughter's boots is based on interviews with Suzanne Cooper and her mother, Wanda Henderson.

In her 2017 custody-case deposition, Jane Whaley discussed her beliefs about how people should dress in a godly way. Her thoughts on blue jeans, for example, are that they should only be worn for work.

Whaley: "If you're a friend of the world, you're an enemy of God because everywhere you go, there's all kind of jeans."

We drew additional information about what congregants should wear from videotapes of Jane Whaley's sermons, as well as numerous tape-recorded services from the mid-1990s.

Our account in which Whaley sells shoes and other items from the pulpit is based on interviews with Suzanne Cooper and her mother, Wanda Henderson.

The offering plate being passed around multiple times during services is corroborated by dozens of former members of the Word of Faith Fellowship.

2

We conducted interviews with numerous members of the Cooper family and extended relatives as well as dozens of other former members of the Word of Faith Fellowship.

The historical information on Brooke McFadden Covington comes from interviews of people who know her, news articles, the 1995 State Bureau of Investigation report, and Whaley's 2017 deposition.

Dozens of former congregants described what they considered Whaley's obsession with the "'unclean' demons," often focused on thoughts of a sexual nature or natural functions of the body, such as erections.

The information about "blasting" and how the ritual is practiced in the church is based on countless hours of interviews with dozens of former members of the church. Most said the sessions often devolved into violence that would include shaking, pushing, slapping, or punching. They said that congregants were often restrained, pinned to the floor, during the violent attacks.

The 1995 State Bureau of Investigation report makes numerous references to blasting, including one witness who described it as "when adults scream in children's faces for hours at a time."

In her 2017 child custody deposition, Whaley said blasting means "any strong demonstration of the power of God." Whaley elaborated that it is used to "break the power of Satan. So in the name of Jesus you drive the demons out." But rather than characterize it as screaming, she said it's "a sound of the Holy Spirit that comes up out of you."

The longtime affiliation of Karel Reynolds and Brooke Covington is based on dozens of interviews, Jane Whaley's 2017 deposition, and the 1995 SBI report. One witness in the report described Reynolds and Covington as the number two and three top leaders, respectively, just below Jane Whaley in rank. The same witness stated that "Sam Whaley was an ordained minister, but he was merely a front." Another witness noted that

Covington, Reynolds, and Jayne Caulder held leadership responsibilities while “Sam Whaley slowly lost any authority that he had over time.”

The role of Covington and Reynolds in counseling the Coopers is based on interviews with Rick and Suzanne Cooper.

3

We conducted interviews with John Peter Evans and numerous former members of the Word of Faith Fellowship and reviewed dozens of pages of documents collected by Evans during the Trinity Foundation investigation. His presence in the church was corroborated by multiple people who were members at the time.

The information about Robert Tilton and Leigh Valentine is based on interviews and news accounts. Part of Valentine’s biography comes from her June 13, 2018, appearance on WCAB—a Rutherfordton, North Carolina-based radio station. In December 2017, the Word of Faith Fellowship began purchasing airtime at the station to counter what it called the *AP*’s “negative news stories” about the church. Since then, more than one hundred and seventy church members, including Valentine, have given glowing “testimonies” about their experiences in the congregation.

The information about “blasting” and how the ritual is practiced is based on hours of interviews with dozens of former members of the church, with most saying the sessions often devolved into violence.

Information that Jane Whaley publicly called out her husband, Sam Whaley, and singled him out for blasting was corroborated by John Peter Evans and multiple former members of the church. In the 1995 SBI report, one witness noted that “Jane Whaley publicly belittles her husband.”

For the sections on Joe and Dayle English, we drew on news stories, interviews with John Peter Evans, and numerous former church members, as well as the couple’s own accounts broadcasted on WCAB and posted on YouTube.com. Information about Ray Nenow came from his appearance on WCAB.

Our account that John Peter Evans was mentored by Sam Whaley and Douglas MacDonald is based on interviews with Evans. MacDonald’s long association with the church is confirmed by accounts in the 1995 SBI report and his presence on the Word of Faith Fellowship website, where he is listed as a minister.

Information that Evans witnessed a six-month-old baby being blasted is based on Evans’s account. But numerous former members also recounted seeing babies and their own children being blasted at the church.

4

We interviewed John Peter Evans and numerous former members of the Word of Faith Fellowship and reviewed documents collected by Evans during the Trinity Foundation investigation.

We also reviewed footage of 1995 episodes of *Inside Edition* and a televised news conference Jane Whaley called in response to the negative television reports.

Documents and letters attributed to Jane Whaley or the church were recovered by the Trinity Foundation from a dumpster on the grounds of the Word of Faith Fellowship.

For the section about Leigh Valentine, the information came from news reports, interviews with former church members, a biography posted on Valentine's business website, and her June 13, 2018, appearance on WCAB.

The biographical information on Sam and Jane Whaley and their daughter, Robin, came from dozens of interviews, published material, yearbooks from Jane Whaley's time at Appalachian State, as well as police and legal documents, including the 1995 State Bureau of Investigation report and Whaley's 2017 child custody deposition. We also drew on numerous tape-recorded Word of Faith Fellowship sermons from the mid-1990s.

For the section on the history of the Prosperity Gospel and Kenneth Hagin, Sr., we relied on numerous interviews with former Word of Faith Fellowship members who went to Rhema Bible College and knew Jane Whaley in Tulsa, Oklahoma, friends and colleagues of Kenneth Hagin, Sr., religion experts, historical documents, and published material.

The information about the church's beginning in a steak house in 1979 is noted in the 1995 SBI report and its growth was described in interviews with multiple former members, as well as by some current members who appeared on WCAB. We also pulled from documents, including the church's incorporation papers.

For our section about "blasting" and how the ritual is practiced in the church, we interviewed numerous former members. All of them were blasted. Most of them said the sessions often devolved into violence that included shaking, pushing, slapping, or punching. Many said they were pinned to the floor while others screamed and punched them.

We also drew on court documents. North Carolina Superior Court Judge Randy Pool, on December 8, 2000, issued a ruling in a custody case in which he described blasting.

"This Court finds that blasting is a high-pitched, shrill, piercing, non-verbal scream. The purpose of blasting was described by witnesses for both the Plaintiff and Defendant as for use in driving out devils. Children are

said by WOFF authority figures, staff, and school personnel to be ‘given to the control of devils which necessitates blasting.’

“Blasting has been and is used on children from birth and will occur from within one foot of a child. Frequently, more than one person engages in blasting at one time. Children are blasted repeatedly for hours. Children and adults are sometimes physically restrained while being subjected to blasting.”

Pool said blasting was dangerous to children.

“Certain practices of Word of Faith, including blasting prayer, had an adverse effect on the health, safety, and welfare of children[,]” and “pose a potential harm.”

The case involved a father who left the church and his wife who stayed behind. They had three children. Pool ordered that the parents have joint custody but warned: “Neither parent shall allow the children to be permitted to engage in blasting.”

The information that Jane Whaley suspected John Peter Evans was a plant is based on interviews with Suzanne Cooper, who recalled being in the meeting in which it was discussed. Whaley’s interaction in confronting Evans is based on multiple interviews with Evans.

5

Whaley’s anticipation of, preparation for, and reaction to the 1995 *Inside Edition* episodes are based on interviews with multiple former members of the Word of Faith Fellowship as well as statements she made in the media.

In the 1995 SBI report, Jane Whaley’s lawyer, James H. Atkins, expressed “concerns regarding *Inside Edition* being in town and stirring up controversy.” In the same document, it is noted that church leaders contacted some former members, telling them not to get involved with *Inside Edition*.

We reviewed the footage of the 1995 episodes of *Inside Edition*, a televised news conference Jane Whaley called in response to the negative television reports, numerous newspaper accounts, and the 1995 State Bureau of Investigation report.

The church’s support of Sheriff Dan Good is noted in the 1995 SBI report.

The biographical information for Stephen and Cindy Cordes comes from interviews with relatives as well as the couple’s appearances on WCAB.

Passages about the church’s regard for communal living is based on dozens of interviews with former members, including those who lived in shared homes, including Rick and Suzanne Cooper and Jamey Anderson.

The information about the death of Harold Lloyd is based on his son's appearance on *Inside Edition* and the 1995 SBI report.

For the section on Crystal Taylor, we interviewed Taylor and numerous former members of the Word of Faith Fellowship, and reviewed law enforcement documents and the 1995 State Bureau of Investigation report.

The information that Jane Whaley acknowledged that she was aware of several instances of sexual abuse at Word of Faith Fellowship is based on a three-hour recording of Whaley secretly made in October 2012 by former congregant Christina Bryant, who was trying to gather information to expose the church's abuses.

6

Whaley's reaction to the 1995 *Inside Edition* episodes is based on interviews with multiple former members of the Word of Faith Fellowship as well as statements she made to the media. Rick and Suzanne Cooper recalled being prepped on what to say if questioned by investigators.

In the 1995 SBI report, Jane Whaley's lawyer, James H. Atkins, expressed "concerns regarding *Inside Edition* being in town and stirring up controversy." In the same report, it is noted that church leaders contacted some former members, telling them not to get involved with *Inside Edition*.

We conducted interviews with John Peter Evans and numerous former members of the Word of Faith Fellowship. We also reviewed internal church documents, footage of the 1995 episodes of *Inside Edition*, the 1995 State Bureau of Investigation report, and court records related to an investigation by the Rutherford County Department of Social Services.

The information about the waiver and release agreements is based on a review of a copy of one of the agreements and interviews with former members.

We talked at length with John Huddle for his biography and account of being drawn into the Word of Faith Fellowship.

The information on the death of Harold Lloyd and allegations of abuse made by others noted in the 315-page SBI report is based on reviews of the report, which was obtained by the authors unredacted and in its entirety.

The biographical information on Brooke Covington is based on interviews with multiple former members, including Sheri Nolan, Sarah Anderson, and Shana Muse.

7

We conducted interviews with numerous former members of the Word of Faith Fellowship, various members of the Cooper family, including Suzanne Cooper's mother, Wanda Henderson, and Suzanne's sister Shana Muse.

Biographical information on Robin Whaley Webster comes from interviews with numerous former members, including Jay Plummer, Sr.; his wife, Susie; Suzanne Cooper; and Whaley's 2017 deposition. When Whaley's family moved a few doors down from him in the early 1980s, Plummer and Robin became close friends.

The section on Suzanne Cooper's pregnancy is based primarily on interviews with Rick and Suzanne Cooper and Wanda Henderson, Suzanne's mother. Multiple former members have corroborated that Jane Whaley tried to control her congregants' sex lives, including when they could have children. In the 1995 SBI report, one witness "stated Jane Whaley disapproves of married couples having sex and refers to it as 'lustful devils.'"

Our account about Whaley's "move of God" is based on interviews with Jeffrey Cooper and his mother, Suzanne Cooper. Numerous former members corroborated Jane Whaley's ongoing insistence that members of her congregation confess their sins to her.

For the section on Crystal Taylor, we interviewed Taylor and numerous former members of the Word of Faith Fellowship, reviewed law enforcement documents, and obtained a lengthy audio recording of Jane Whaley discussing the case. Allegations that Taylor had been sexually abused are also found in the 1995 SBI report, Rutherford County Department of Social Services records, and court documents.

8

For the section on Sam Whaley opening with a prayer before the US House of Representatives, we relied on the July 14, 1999, edition of the Congressional Record and a C-Span video of the prayer.

The information that Congressman Charles Taylor's office provided computers to the church is based on a December 2000 article by the *Charlotte Observer*.

The information that Laura Bridges landed a job in the Rutherford County court clerk's office in 1997 is based on a lawsuit filed by congregant Ramona Hall.

Our account that Sam Whaley had become an "afterthought" in the Word of Faith Fellowship is based on dozens of interviews in which for-

mer members said Jane Whaley was the ultimate leader of the church. In the 1995 SBI report, one witness noted that “Jane Whaley publicly belittles her husband.”

Whaley acknowledged in her 2017 custody-case deposition that Word of Faith Fellowship has ties to churches in Brazil and Ghana.

The section on Shana Muse is based on numerous police and court records and interviews with Muse, her relatives, and other former members of the church, including Suzanne Cooper, Wanda Henderson, and Muse’s children: Patrick Covington, Sarah Anderson, and Rachel Bryant.

The section on Rick Cooper’s concern about his children being forced to work is based on interviews with Cooper, his wife, Suzanne, and his children. Dozens of former members corroborated during interviews that congregants, including children, are forced to work.

The scene about the Coopers’ attempt to leave the church in 2001 is based on interviews with Rick and Suzanne Cooper, their children, including Benjamin and Jeffrey, as well as Shana Muse and her mother, Wanda Henderson.

9

The section on Shana Muse is based on police and court records and interviews with Muse, her relatives, and other former members of the church, including Suzanne Cooper, Wanda Henderson, and Muse’s children: Patrick Covington, Sarah Anderson, and Rachel Bryant.

In her 2017 deposition, Whaley acknowledged that the church teaches against television, radio, and magazines.

For our section about the church’s strict rules involving sex and holidays, we drew on dozens of interviews with numerous former members, including Rick and Suzanne Cooper. In her 2017 child custody deposition, Whaley said Christmas is a “pagan holiday.” When an attorney challenged that it was a celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, Whaley said he was “ignorant.”

For Whaley’s views on holidays and other Word of Faith Fellowship practices, we also pulled from tape-recorded sermons from the mid-1990s.

10

We conducted multiple interviews with Jamey Anderson, three of the so-called Five Boys, and other witnesses who were in the sanctuary when Jane Whaley designated them with the name. Nearly two dozen former

members recounted witnessing Anderson being beaten, locked up, or humiliated from the pulpit during his life in the church.

Other members of the Five Boys, including John Blanton and Peter Cooper, corroborated the way they were isolated and abused. Multiple other former members of the church recounted the Five Boys being isolated from their peers and shamed by church leaders.

For the section on Mark Doyle, we pulled from numerous interviews of former church members as well as Doyle's appearance on WCAB, which is posted on YouTube.com. His treatment of children in the church is based on interviews with multiple former members, including Jamey Anderson and Benjamin and Peter Cooper. We also reviewed police and court documents related to Doyle's criminal case. He was charged but later acquitted of beating a teenager in the church.

We conducted numerous interviews with John Huddle for our account of his time inside the church, including his 2002 move to Spindale, North Carolina, from Greenville, South Carolina.

11

We talked at length with John David Cooper, his relatives, and numerous former members about the Word of Faith Christian School and the church's practices.

In the 1995 SBI report, Jane Whaley acknowledged that she and others paddled children. Whaley stated that "the number of strikes a student received from a paddle was determined by the spirit of God." Some, she said, may have received "five or six strikes from the paddle."

Dozens of former members, however, said it was common for children to be hit much more than that. Many, like Danielle Cordes, said the beatings could last for hours, leaving deep, painful bruises.

12

We conducted numerous interviews with Benjamin Cooper, his relatives, and former members.

For the part on the violence that had gotten worse over the years, we drew on dozens of interviews with multiple former members. All said shaming and abuse were a way of life and primarily revolved around blasting. Information about "blasting" and how the ritual is practiced in the church is based on hours of interviews with dozens of former members of the church, with most saying the sessions often devolved into violence such as shaking, pushing, slapping, or punching.

We also drew on court documents, including North Carolina Superior Court Judge Randy Pool's December 8, 2000, ruling that said blasting had "an adverse effect on the health, safety, and welfare of children."

Mark Doyle's biographical information is based on numerous interviews with former members as well as his appearance on the church's radio show on WCAB. Our account of his treatment of children in the church was based on interviews with multiple former members, including Jamey Anderson, Benjamin Cooper, and his brother Peter Cooper, as well as court records in which he was charged and acquitted of assault. We also interviewed Benjamin Talley, the man who filed assault charges against Doyle.

13

The information about Shana Muse's fight for her children is based on interviews with Muse, her children Sarah, Rachel, and Patrick, as well as numerous others, including Rick and Suzanne Cooper and Wanda Henderson. We also reviewed court records and published material that followed Muse's journey.

Our account that violence inside the church had gotten worse with time is based on interviews with multiple former members. All said shaming and abuse were a way of life and primarily revolved around blasting. Information about "blasting" and how the ritual is practiced in the church is based on hours of interviews with dozens of former members, police reports, and court documents. Most said the sessions often devolved into violence such as shaking, pushing, slapping, or punching.

Our account of William Brock's role in the church is based on interviews with former members. Suzanne Cooper noted that he was the only person who could sway Jane Whaley's behavior. She recalled one incident in which he scolded Whaley for delays in the construction of the Coopers' house.

Kent Covington's biographical information is based on interviews with former members, including Sheri Nolan, Sarah Anderson, Rick and Suzanne Cooper, as well as state business documents, North Carolina criminal records, the 1995 SBI report, Jane Whaley's 2017 child custody deposition, and information from the websites of Covington's businesses.

For information about the church being a cult, we drew on interviews with former members, psychologists, and published material, including a 2002 newspaper story in which Mary Alice Chrnalogar, a cult expert, called the Word of Faith Fellowship "one of the top five most dangerous cults in America."

The section of how Brooke Covington conspired with Muse's daughter to retrieve a note that could be used against Shana in the custody case

was based on interviews with Shana Muse, her daughter Sarah, who wrote the note, and Suzanne Cooper, one of the women who picked it up. Information about how Brooke Covington prepped members to lie under oath came from a number of sources, including Suzanne Cooper, Rachel Bryant and Sarah Anderson.

14

For the part about the child abuse investigation, we drew on dozens of interviews with former members, including Danielle Cordes, Rick and Suzanne Cooper, John David Cooper, and Jamey Anderson. We also relied on court documents, including a federal lawsuit filed by the church against the Rutherford County Department of Social Services.

We interviewed Danielle Cordes and numerous former members about the church's practices, including spanking. In the 1995 SBI report, Jane Whaley acknowledged that she and others paddled children, though the passage did not name specific children. Whaley stated that "the number of strikes a student received from a paddle was determined by the spirit of God." Some, she said, might have received "five or six strikes from the paddle."

In the 2003 lawsuit, the church said it "believes in the use of corporal punishment as discipline for misbehavior of children, based on religious doctrine as mandated by the Bible." But the church argued that spanking is more a spiritual act than a physical one. Therefore, the church "teaches not to apply hard pressure with the paddle." Both the child and adult performing the spanking are taught to cry out to Jesus and to mix faith with the spanking, asking God to change the child's heart. And the lawsuit said "only one to three swats are administered."

We talked to dozens of former members who disputed that account. They said it was common for children to be hit multiple times and the spankings could last for hours. Many former members, like Danielle Cordes, described the routine. At first, they'd get hit with a paddle between fifteen minutes to a half hour. Then a minister or parent would stop to see if the child had a "breakthrough." But usually the adult would deem that the child still had sin in their heart. So they would resume the spanking. Dozens of former members said spankings were so commonplace that they could take place at any time in any location—from Jane Whaley's office to their homes. We talked at length to numerous members who said they were badly hurt in the sessions.

We based Lynn Millwood's biographical information on her appearance on WCAB. For our account of her behavior inside the church, we conducted interviews with multiple former members, including Danielle

Cordes. The account of Danielle Cordes's abuse at the hands of Lynn Millwood is based on interviews with Cordes and others. Danielle's brother, Stephen Cordes, confirmed her accounts. Stephen said Millwood was assigned to his family and beatings were common.

15

The information about Lacy Wien's attack and the criminal charges she filed against Jane Whaley is based on court documents and published reports, including her appearance on *Inside Edition* when she said she'd endured more than one thousand spankings during her decade in the church.

Part of Wien's allegations were that she was assaulted by Whaley for resisting blasting. We interviewed numerous former Word of Faith Fellowship members who said the violence would become more intense if they resisted blasting, or other forms of church discipline.

For the section on the settlement of the church's lawsuit, we relied on documents from the federal court and the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, and interviews with numerous former members of the Word of Faith Fellowship, including Danielle Cordes, Jamey Anderson, and John David Cooper.

The following language is contained in the settlement:

"Under no circumstances shall RCDSS [Rutherford County Department of Social Services] commence any investigation of any WFF member or subject child based on WFF religious beliefs or practices concerning music, television, radio, movies, dress or appearance, sports, holidays, or birthdays.

"Plaintiffs maintain that their religious practices of strong or blasting prayer, or discipleship, as practiced by WFF and WFF members cannot constitute abuse or neglect within the meaning of the laws and Constitution of the State of North Carolina, or the Constitution of the United States."

16

Our account of how Luiz Vargas and other Brazilians were treated by the church is based on interviews with numerous former members, including fifteen who belonged to the Brazilian church. They said they were forced to work, often for no pay, and subjected to physical or verbal abuse.

The history of the Brazilian churches is based on documents and dozens of interviews, including some conducted by *Associated Press* reporter Peter Prengaman in Brazil for stories subsequently published by *AP*.

For the section about Jamey Anderson, we talked at length to nearly

a dozen former members, including Anderson, Jay Plummer, Sr., and his wife, Susie, and son, Jay Plummer II.

The biographical information about Todd and Karel Reynolds is based on their appearances on WCAB, as well as interviews with former members.

Our account of Jane Whaley telling her congregation a story about Joe English being thrown across the room was described by numerous former members. They said Whaley often repeated it from the pulpit—and that it was a pivotal moment in Word of Faith Fellowship’s history. The former members said violence became more frequent after Whaley’s announcement.

For biographical information about Rusty Millwood, we drew on his appearance on WCAB. We also conducted interviews with former members who talked about Millwood’s role inside the Word of Faith Fellowship.

17

We conducted dozens of interviews of former members, including John David Cooper, Benjamin Cooper, and Luiz Vargas for information about how young people were paired off for marriage. We talked at length with John Huddle about how difficult it was for him to leave the Word of Faith Fellowship.

Our account of the unemployment scheme was based on multiple interviews with former members, including Randy Fields, Rick Cooper, and Rachel Bryant, who said they participated in “God’s plan,” as well as court documents that corroborated their stories.

We conducted interviews with former members about Jane Whaley’s finances and “love offerings.” Additional details were contained in Whaley’s 2017 deposition in a child custody case involving Sarah Anderson and her former husband, Nick Anderson.

The section about the Lower Building is based on numerous interviews with multiple people who spent time there, including Michael Lowry, Rick Cooper, Patrick Covington, and Chad Cooper, as well as people like Jeffrey Cooper, who had knowledge of how the building was being used to house the church’s “worst sinners.” We also used police and court documents.

In her 2017 deposition, Whaley acknowledged that some people—including a young boy—lived in the former storage building, including Rick Cooper and Shana Muse’s children Patrick and Justin Covington, “to get help” or to have a “heart change.” She noted that at least one person was there for two years.

But in the deposition, Whaley said no one was held against their will. Over the years, she said the building was used for different purposes.

When Lowry was there, Whaley said the building was being used for “Bible study.”

“Then Mark Morris and Chris Hall, two of the ministers in the church—Mark’s an attorney—went down there and started teaching them, and they had Bible study and prayer every night... So their lives began to change. It was more like a Baptist retreat session.”

When the attorney asked, “Baptist retreat?” Whaley responded yes. “A retreat-like session at that time where men would come together, pray. I’m talking—talking about at night. They had their jobs. They had their schools in the daytime. Then along that time we had—I can think of four or five situations where parents, a wife kicked their young people out of the house. Patrick and Justin was involved in it at that time... They had nowhere to go. So they went and sent them down there to get prayer, to get in the Word, to get a heart change. One wife, which was Suzanne Cooper, kicked her husband out, and he had no place to go. And out of the kindness of my heart—they didn’t have money for him to go somewhere—I told him he could live there.”

We also pulled information about the building from a three-and-a-half-hour secretly taped conversation between Whaley and Christina Bryant in October 2012.

Former members said beatings and blasting were a way of life in the Lower Building. We also used court and police documents to describe the practice.

For biological information about Mark Morris, we drew on information from his appearance on WCAB. For his behavior inside the church, we drew on nearly two dozen interviews from former Word of Faith Fellowship members.

18

We interviewed numerous former members of the Word of Faith Fellowship, including Michael Lowry and John Huddle, as well as people who tried to help them, including Nancy Burnette and Brent Childers of Faith in America.

We reviewed court documents related to the two foster boys in Burnette’s care, as well as interviewed their former foster mother.

Information about Robynn Spence is based on interviews with her before she died and nearly a dozen people who knew her, including Michael Davis and his wife, Amanda, two former Rutherford County law enforcement officials. The information that Spence suspected Ramona Hall of using her court position to help the church comes from inter-

views with Spence, Nancy Burnette, and former Word of Faith Fellowship members.

Our account of Michael Lowry's quest for justice is based on interviews with Lowry, his supporters, former church members, as well as police reports and court documents that name the people allegedly involved in the violence. We conducted an interview with former district attorney Brad Greenway.

Information about the Lower Building is based on numerous interviews with former members who spent time there. In her 2017 deposition, Jane Whaley acknowledged that some people were sent there, but said the building was mostly used for Bible study.

Our account of the meeting between Robynn Spence and Kevin Logan is based on *AP* interviews with Spence as well as six people she told about the plot, including Burnette, Mike and Amanda Davis, and Jack Conner, a former Rutherford County sheriff. Later, an *AP* reporter talked briefly to Logan, who confirmed that he had met with Spence. But he declined to go into detail because he said he was afraid for his life. We also pulled transcripts from a secretly recorded tape of a conversation between Rutherford County Sheriff Chris Francis and Spence's father. On the tape, the sheriff said a man was hired to "harass" Spence, not kill her.

19

We talked at length with members of the Cooper family, including John, Benjamin, and Peter.

John David Cooper described his beating as the worst he had experienced up to that point. Peter Cooper and other former members confirmed John's assault.

For the section about the Lower Building, we relied on dozens of interviews with former members who were in the structure or visited to minister to congregants inside the place. We also pulled information from court documents and a PowerPoint with the layout of the building created by former member Patrick Covington.

We talked at length to Rick Cooper about his time in the building.

For the section on Jerry Cooper's run-in with members of the church security team, we interviewed Jerry Cooper, Michael Lowry, and Randy Fields. Information about the criminal case is based on court records, a transcript of the trial, and eyewitness accounts by people like John Huddle.

Our account of how church leaders, including Jane Whaley, her son-in-law, Frank Webster, and others tried to derail criminal investigations is based on interviews with former members who were at the meetings, including Jeffrey Cooper.

For the section on the unemployment benefits scheme, we relied on interviews with nearly a dozen former members and court documents. Four church members, including Kent Covington, pleaded guilty for their roles in the scheme.

20

The section on Christina Bryant's conversation with Jane Whaley is based on interviews with Bryant, as well as a secret three-and-a-half-hour recording she made during the October 2012 meeting.

We interviewed numerous former members, including Michael Lowry, Jerry Cooper, Jeffrey Cooper, Nancy Burnette, and others, as well as a visit to the church by *AP* reporter Mitch Weiss.

Michael Lowry's experience in the church is based on dozens of interviews, including ones with Lowry and Jeffrey Cooper.

During interviews, Jeffrey Cooper described Whaley's attempts to derail investigations into Lowry and to hide that the Lower Building was used as a de facto prison.

Information about the Lower Building is based on interviews with multiple people who spent time there.

In her 2017 deposition, Whaley acknowledged that some people were sent there, including Rick Cooper and Shana Muse's children Patrick and Justin Covington, "to get help" or to have a "heart change."

Multiple people have noted that beatings and blasting were a way of life in the Lower Building.

Lowry's disappearance is based on interviews with Nancy Burnette, John Huddle, Brent Childers, and others.

The information about Lowry's interview with an *AP* reporter is based on Mitch's notes and recollections of the event.

21

For biographical information about Matthew Fenner and his time in the church, we drew on numerous interviews with Fenner, his family, and friends, including his mother, Linda Addington, and Danielle Cordes. Our account of Jane Whaley hitting Danielle Cordes is based on interviews with Danielle and several former members, including her brother.

The section on Fenner's travels with the Whaleys is based on multiple interviews with Fenner. His church-sanctioned relationship with Danielle Cordes and his attraction to Patrick Covington are based on interviews with Fenner, Patrick, Danielle, and others.

Our account of Matthew Fenner's assault on January 27, 2013, is based on dozens of interviews, police records, court testimony, and recordings of Fenner's meetings and phone calls with law enforcement officials, including former federal prosecutor Jill Rose and Rutherford County Sheriff Chris Francis.

Seven former members recounted the event to the authors, including Fenner, Danielle Cordes, and Sarah Anderson, who admits to taking part in the attack. Witnesses said Fenner was beaten during a blasting session. Information about "blasting" and how the ritual is practiced in the church is based on hours of interviews with dozens of former members of the church, with most saying the sessions often devolved into violence such as shaking, pushing, slapping, or punching.

22

Susanna Kokkonen's visit to the Word of Faith Fellowship is based on published material and interviews with former church members.

Our account of Danielle Cordes's escape from the church is based on interviews with multiple former members, including Cordes, Patrick Covington, Jeanna Powell, and Matthew Fenner.

The section of her return home to collect her belongings is based on interviews with Cordes, Jeanna Powell, Matthew Fenner, and Patrick Covington.

23

Our account of John David Cooper's wedding is based on numerous interviews with the Cooper family and friends, as well as a video of the entire ceremony.

24

We interviewed dozens of people for our account of Matthew Fenner's fight for justice. We also reviewed court records and multiple recordings of Fenner's meetings and phone calls with law enforcement officials. Mitch also covered Fenner's trial that ended in mistrial.

The section about the plot against Robynn Spence is based on interviews with Spence before she died as well as interviews with six people she told about the plot, including Burnette. We also have emails she exchanged with an anti-cult group saying the church had a "bounty on her head."

In one mail, she wrote: “They have endless amounts of money and power... I am about the only elected official that they cannot control. We have nowhere else to turn, no one will help.”

In her last email to the group in February 2014, she wrote: “I won’t let them intimidate me. I’m a well-known public figure here so they will have to be very smart on how they will succeed in killing me.”

Our account of the scene about the event honoring Spence and raising awareness about child abuse is based on interviews with Nancy Burnette, Christina Bryant, Jeanna Powell, Matthew Fenner, and others, as well as a recording of the event. The section where Patrick Covington recounts the violence he faced inside the church comes from more than a dozen interviews with former members who said they witnessed the beatings.

25

For the section about Jane Whaley’s insistence that John David Cooper and his brother Peter attend the same medical school, we drew on interviews with John, Peter, and Benjamin Cooper, and other former members.

The account of John David Cooper’s escape from the church is based on numerous interviews with John and his relatives, as well as Jamey Anderson, Danielle Cordes, and Luiz Vargas.

26

We conducted numerous interviews with former church members and others about Matthew Fenner’s fight for justice, including Fenner, Burnette, and Huddle. We also used police and court documents and recordings of his meetings and phone calls with law enforcement officials.

The interactions between Fenner and his supporters and Sheriff Chris Francis are based on numerous interviews and recordings of some of their conversations. Our account of Chris Back playing the role of Matthew Fenner during a church meeting comes from interviews with several former members who were in the room.

For the section about the exodus of most of the Cooper family from the church, we drew on numerous interviews with Rick and Suzanne Cooper, as well as their sons Benjamin, Jeffrey, and John, and other family members and friends. Our account of Jane Whaley’s sermon that led to Jeffrey Cooper leaving the church comes from several former members. They say Whaley claimed a member had not been abused. They say Whaley said the young man had slipped and fallen into a wall. But

Cooper and others said the member was pushed so hard he went through the drywall in the church.

We interviewed Linda Addington about her testimony before the grand jury. She has since left the church and acknowledges that she was lying when she denied her son was assaulted. Our account also drew on numerous interviews with former church members and court documents.

27

Our account of the Cooper family reunion is based on multiple interviews with their family and relatives, including Wanda Henderson.

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