

# Ex-minister of secretive sect admits to child sex abuse

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| (L-R) Lauren Rohs, Sheri Autrey and Michael Havet - pictured here as children

**By George Wright**

BBC News

**Robert Corfield, a man who abused a boy in a secretive Christian church in the 1980s, has spoken publicly about what happened for the first time.**

He was confronted by the BBC as part of a wider look into claims of child sexual abuse spanning decades within the church, known as The Truth.

His name is one of more than 700 given by people to a hotline set up to report sexual abuse within the church.

The sect says it addresses all abuse allegations.

The church, which has no official name but is often referred to as The Truth or The Way, is believed to have up to 100,000 members worldwide, with the majority in North America.

The potential scale of the abuse has been captured through a hotline - set-up last year by two women who say they were also sexually abused by a church leader

when they were children. People have phoned in claiming they too were abused, with testimonies stretching back decades through to present day.

The highly secretive and insular nature of the church has helped abuse to thrive, say former and current insiders who spoke to the BBC. It has many unwritten rules, including that followers must marry within the group and keep mixing with outsiders to a minimum.

The church was founded in Ireland by a Scottish evangelist in 1897 and is built around ministers spreading New Testament teachings through word-of-mouth.

One of its hallmarks is that ministers give up their possessions and must be taken in by church members as they travel around, spreading the gospel. This makes children living in the homes they visit vulnerable to abuse, the insiders said.

***Warning: This article contains details some readers may find upsetting***



| Robert Corfield (L) told the BBC he sexually abused Michael (R) for six years.

Former church member Michael Havet, 54, told the BBC he was abused by Robert Corfield in the 1980s, from the age of 12.

"People called me 'Bob's little companion' - I just felt dirty and still do," says Mr Havet, speaking from his home in Ottawa.

After abusing him, Mr Havet says Mr Corfield would force him to kneel beside him and pray.

"I had to work hard to get past that and find my prayer life again," he says.

When confronted about the child abuse allegations by the BBC, Mr Corfield admitted that they had taken place for about six years in the 1980s.

"I have to acknowledge that's true," he said.

Mr Corfield was a minister - known within the sect as a "worker" - in Saskatchewan, Canada, at the time of the abuse.

This is the first time he has publicly admitted to child abuse, though he has previously been confronted by church members and wrote two private letters to Mr Havet in 2004 and 2005 which asked for forgiveness and said he was seeing a therapist. In one letter, Mr Corfield said he was "making a list of victims".

"We don't want to miss anyone who has been a victim of my actions," he wrote.

However, when asked about this by the BBC, Mr Corfield said that there were no other victims "in the same sense that Michael was", and that he had given two or three other teenagers massages.

## Abuser given 'fresh start'

Mr Havet is among a dozen people who have told the BBC that widespread abuse has been ignored or covered up in The Truth for decades - with some of the accused remaining in powerful positions for years.

The way his own case was dealt with by the church is a prime example, believes Mr Havet.

He reported his abuse in 1993 to Dale Shultz, Saskatchewan's most senior church leader - known as an "overseer". Overseers are the most senior members of the church and there is one for each US state and Canadian province where there is an active following.

But Mr Shultz didn't go to the police - and, says Mr Havet, violently assaulted him a few weeks later because he thought he had told others of the abuse claims.

"He grabbed my shoulders yelling at me, slamming my head against a concrete pillar," says Mr Havet, "splitting it open and causing it to bleed."

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If you are affected by any of the issues in this story, [visit the BBC Action Line.](#)

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Mr Havet says Mr Shultz then "encouraged" him to leave the church - while his childhood abuser, Robert Corfield, was just moved to be a minister across the border, in the US state of Montana.

Mr Corfield told the BBC that he believed it was Mr Shultz's decision to send him to Montana, where he remained in post for 25 years.

"It was suggested it would give me a fresh beginning and probably also put space between me and the victim," he said.

Mr Corfield was removed as minister last year after being confronted about Michael's abuse by another congregation member, according to internal church emails seen by the BBC. One email also suggested "it is possible there may be additional victims".

The ex-minister told the BBC that he "voluntarily stepped down when the accusations of Michael were presented" against him, and that he had "not been informed of any allegations beyond that."

When contacted by the BBC, Dale Shultz said via email that "much of the information that you have received concerning me is distorted and inaccurate". However he declined to go into any further detail.

## A global crisis

Mr Havet is one of more than 1,000 current and former members of the sect to have contacted a hotline set up by campaign group, Advocates for The Truth.

The group was founded last year by Americans Cynthia Liles, Lauren Rohs and Sheri Autrey.

They say they have been given the names of more than 700 alleged perpetrators in 21 countries, including the UK, Ireland, Australia and Russia. They plan to build cases against those on the list and take them to the police.

All the women used to belong to The Truth and Lauren Rohs and Sheri Autrey say they were abused by the same man.

That man was Ms Rohs' father, a senior minister called Steve Rohs.

Lauren Rohs traced Ms Autrey after reading her anonymous online account of childhood sexual abuse, in 2019.

In the post, Ms Autrey described how her abuser would sing Maneater by 80s pop duo Hall & Oates to her when she was in his bedroom at night.

Ms Rohs knew immediately that the man being described as the perpetrator was her own father, as it was the same song she remembers him singing to her as a child.

"I sat there stunned," says the 35 year-old. "It disoriented me beyond belief."

She says that her father subjected her to years of sexual, physical and emotional abuse from as early as she can remember.

Meanwhile, Ms Autrey says Steve Rohs stayed at her family home in Tulare County, California, for two months in 1982 - when she was turning 14 - and molested her daily.

He would sing Maneater because "a part of his manipulation was that I was this wild seductress", the 54-year-old says.



| Sheri Autrey, seen here as a child

There is a 20-year age gap between the two women. By the time his daughter was born, Mr Rohs had given up his role as a worker and started a family in San Diego, California. They later moved to Washington state, Idaho and Colorado.

Lauren Rohs says her father gave various reasons for their constant moving, including that "God needs us in a new place".

The BBC put all the allegations to Mr Rohs in emails and social media messages, but he did not respond.

## Abuse culture persists

Ms Rohs says during her time in the church in the 1990s and 2000s, workers were like "demigods" and never questioned, and that callers to the abuse hotline confirm that this culture persists today.

Like Mr Havet, Ms Autrey says she spoke out about her abuser - and he was protected.

In 1986, she confided in her mother about being abused by Steve Rohs.

"I felt scared, dirty, ashamed, embarrassed, and guilty," says Ms Autrey, who was 17 at the time and believed she would be in "big trouble".

But her mother believed her right away and reported the man to the California state overseer, who has since died.

In a letter dated 11 May 1986, written by Mr Rohs and seen by the BBC, he admits to the overseer that he and the teenager "did kiss and touch each other intimately" and that he had "begged for forgiveness" ever since.

Mr Rohs was later brought to Ms Autrey's home by workers where he verbally apologised to her.

"I responded that he was not sorry for what he had done or he would have apologised long before," Ms Autrey recalls.



Steve Rohs, pictured in the 1980s

Despite admitting to child abuse, Mr Rohs remained a respected and influential member of the church. His daughter says he was even promoted in 1994 to being a church elder - a person of seniority who holds meetings in their own home.

The BBC understands he now lives in Minnesota with Ms Rohs' mother - their daughter is estranged from them both. He works as an insurance agent and was an active member of The Truth until April last year, after his daughter and Ms Autrey brought their allegations to the state's overseer and he was removed from meetings.

## The floodgates open

The catalyst for the hotline was the death of Oregon's overseer, Dean Bruer, in 2022.

He was one of The Truth's most respected leaders and had worked for the group for 46 years, across six US states.

An internal letter was written by his successor which stated Mr Bruer had a history of abuse including "rape and abuse of underage victims".

It is not clear what the motivation behind writing the letter was but it leaked and soon found its way onto Facebook and TikTok.

Then more people started coming forward to tell their own stories of abuse.

"I think we thought the hotline was solely for Dean Bruer victims but what the hotline did was just open the floodgates," Ms Rohs says.

The friends say they now want the kind of justice they didn't manage to get for themselves.

"When I found Sheri it was a really rather rare and massive healing," says Ms Rohs.

"It has been distressing as survivors to go back and hear the amount of filth and evil," Ms Autrey says.

"Ours was bad enough but to see other people in such terrible situations - it's beyond angering. It's been ugly but also very rewarding."

Ms Autrey stepped down from the Advocates in December.



| Michael Havet, 54, continues to be affected by the sexual abuse he experienced as a child

Because The Truth has no official leader, the BBC instead put the allegations to more than 20 overseers in North America, via email.

The only one to respond was Rob Newman, the overseer for California.

"We actively address all abuse allegations involving participants in our fellowship," he wrote in an email, before Mr Corfield's confession.

"Our paramount concern is that victims receive the professional help that they need. We take all allegations of abuse seriously, strongly recommend mandated reporter training to all, and encourage everyone to report issues to the proper legal authorities."

Ms Autrey believes change will not happen before any culpable overseers are jailed.

"It's an extremely well-oiled machine for criminals," she says.

"It's a perfected system that has gone on for 12 decades."