



ILLUSTRATION BY TONY BELL

## Irish-based Christian sect ‘protected abusers for decades’

The authorities are supporting the FBI’s global investigation into the Two by Twos, with roughly 900 individuals accused across more than 30 countries

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Jason Johnson

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The Irish authorities are liaising with the FBI as part of a widening international investigation into alleged sexual abuse within a Christian sect founded in Ireland.

The sect, commonly known as the Two by Twos, is facing documented allegations via survivor groups against more than 900 individuals in more than 30 countries. It has also been accused of protecting abusers for decades by transferring ministers across international borders. These allegations are denied by the sect.

A number of Irish-related allegations have been shared with US federal investigators who are exploring claims that some abusers travelled between Ireland and the United States as part of the sect’s itinerant ministry.

Alleged victims in Ireland have been coming forward amid concerns within the fellowship that what is known is “just the tip of the iceberg”, with survivors saying a culture of forgiveness has at times discouraged reporting to civil authorities.

The FBI is gathering intelligence directly from those who claim they suffered abuse, with a spokesperson adding that it has also been sharing information with “law enforcement partners” in Ireland and the UK.

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About 2,000 survivors have reported abuse to advocacy groups across Europe, the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa as the FBI maps the global picture.

With no formal name, the Two by Twos — also known as Cooneyites, Dippers and the Truth — was founded in Ireland in 1897 within the Protestant evangelical tradition.

Its itinerant ministers, known as workers, travel in pairs and live as guests in members' homes for days or weeks at a time, reliant on hospitality and cash donations passed in envelopes. They carry no formal credentials and, until 2016 in Ireland, operated without any formal safeguarding policy.

- [I crossed the world piecing together John Smyth's decades of abuse](#)

Worldwide membership stands at between 75,000 and 85,000, with about 2,000 members in Ireland meeting in home-based churches, typically three or four families in a living room on Sundays.

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Jonathan O'Reilly, a Cork-based advocate who grew up in the fellowship and has spent more than a decade challenging its handling of abuse, said: "The way this organisation operates has given opportunity for sex offenders to operate. Workers move from home to home with complete trust and these people are held up as holy, but some of them clearly are not.

"When something terrible happens, the first question is never, how do we protect this child? It's, how do we protect the ministry?"

This view is disputed by Craig Fulton, the fellowship's leader, or overseer, in Ireland.

One family, whose case has been passed directly to the FBI, allege that a member — who was not a missionary — abused their daughter from the age of 12 during fellowship events. They also claim that, although the man was asked to step away "until things become clear", he became involved again in fellowship activities after two months.



Craig Fulton

No criminal charges have been brought, and within a decentralised movement that stresses repentance, his presence at gatherings has continued.

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The girl had shown signs of severe distress in her early teens but it was only when she was admitted to a psychiatric hospital, while suicidal, that she disclosed claims of what had been done to her over two years by a member of their community.

While the matter was reported to gardai and Tusla, the child and family protection agency, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions said that a successful prosecution was unlikely. The family moved away from the area to avoid seeing the man.

Her father said: "I can personally name nine individuals in Ireland, one deceased, with credible allegations against them. What we know is just the tip of the iceberg."

• [Call to keep church abuse records open](#)

The Sunday Times has also spoken to one man whose wife, after taking a sedative, was joined on a bus journey by a fellow member of the sect. A sexual assault began after she told the man she was going to sleep. The attack continued

for the three-hour journey, she said, leaving her “frozen in fear”. The attacker was convicted, fined and given a suspended sentence.

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When her husband approached figures in the community, one allegedly asked: “How bad was this, that you feel you need to go to the police?” This account is disputed by Fulton.

Another case involves Noel Tanner, a Co Cork-born preacher who began sexually assaulting a 13-year-old boy in Co Tyrone in the early 1970s.

When the matter was reported in the mid-1970s, Tanner was moved from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland and it is claimed that it was asked that a victim’s written statement be destroyed.

Tanner was convicted of sexual offences in 1984 and again in 1991. In 2017 he was jailed for a year in Northern Ireland for the Tyrone attack.



The FBI is investigating claims against the Two by Twos

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The victim said he knew of 11 other males abused by Tanner and estimated the total number at between 50 and 100.

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The fellowship did not introduce a formal safeguarding policy in Ireland until 2016. When one victim's relative requested a copy in 2022, he said he was told he was the first person to have asked for one.

An updated version, dated January 2026, sets out reporting obligations to Tusla and acknowledges workers are subject to a garda vetting process.

Ministers in Ireland are treated as "mandated persons" under child protection law, according to the fellowship's Irish leader, Fulton.

He said the fellowship had developed its safeguarding policy "step by step with Tusla", adding that the agency had "okayed" the updated document.

In its safeguarding policy the group states that it "is not a formal or registered body and we simply use the title 'Christians'".

Cynthia Liles, a US investigator and former fellowship member who helped launch the Advocates for the Truth hotline, has issued multiple "red boxes" identifying alleged perpetrators connected to the fellowship — published when three or more verified allegations exist against one person.

Liles began investigating after the 2022 death of the US church leader Dean Bruer, whose laptop revealed a digital trail of widespread abuse by him.

She said that for more than 100 years "church leaders maintained and protected predators by relocating them across regions, states and international borders to avoid detection".



Cynthia Liles

Fulton said that when allegations are raised, “the first thing that we do is report it” to Tusla and gardai. He said the safeguarding policy, although first emerging as late as 2016, had been developed [in consultation with Tusla](#) and that none of the 30 workers in Ireland at present had outstanding allegations against them.

“Nothing is pushed under the carpet,” he said. “Nothing at all. If something comes to light, we deal with it.”

On the case of the young woman, he said her alleged abuser had been “asked not to attend our fellowship until things become clear”.

He added: “We base our principles on things like repentance and forgiveness. So if a person caused that hurt to someone else, hasn’t given true repentance, how can he be part of a Christian fellowship?”

The FBI launched its global investigation in late 2023 and has been working via its legal attaché in London with partners in the UK and Ireland. It is calling on “victims outside of the United States to contact the FBI”.

An Garda Siochana said it did not comment on “named entities”.