

# Abuse survivors struggle with loss of faith, confidence

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ST. HELENS, Ore. (RNS)—It's been 23 years since Diane Bach left the Tony Alamo Christian Ministries compound in Arkansas, but she still struggles to make decisions for herself.

As a waitress hands Bach a menu, she swallows hard. Her hands begin to tremble; she shifts uncomfortably in her chair. Soon, she's sweating, and red blotches pool on her chest like spilled wine.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I have a lot of trouble ordering from a simple menu because, to this day, I have trouble making my own choices."

Alamo's critics, including hundreds of former members, call his ministry a cult that brainwashes its members with punishments including withholding food, beatings and being booted from the church. Those leaving the church were told they would die, go insane or turn into homosexuals.

For Elishah Franckiewicz, the first child born in Tony Alamo's compound, recovery is about building her own system of beliefs, something she was denied as a child. (Newhouse News Service Photo/Olivia Bucks)

Some former members were physically abused as children at the compound. Others, like Bach, lived there mainly as adults. Surviving in mainstream society has been difficult for them all.

Alamo, 74, was arrested in Arizona last month on suspicion of transporting minors across state lines for sexual purposes. Days earlier, the FBI raided

the Arkansas compound as part of a child pornography investigation and removed six girls.

Unlike many of the adults and children who say they lived under Alamo's control, Bach, 54—who lived at the compound from age 17 to 31—says she never was physically or sexually abused.

Instead, every aspect of her life was controlled, including whom she married. She wasn't allowed to decide anything for herself, she says, and was brainwashed into believing Alamo had the power to send her to hell if she didn't work in his businesses for free.

What Bach lost, she says, is her faith—in herself and in God. She was thrown out of the compound when her former husband ran afoul of Tony Alamo.

“Having spirituality in my life is very important,” said Bach, who now operates a hotel with her second husband, Jim. “Having a belief, something solid, something concrete, was something I needed. I'd rather be physically raped than spiritually raped, because now I don't know what to believe.”

Whether perpetrated by Catholic priests or charismatic cult leaders, abuse by religious figures can be more harmful than other forms of maltreatment: A building block of recovery for some people—belief in God—is exactly what's been stripped away.



Diane Bach, who spent her early adulthood at a compound run by controversial evangelist Tony Alamo, still struggles to make decisions on her own. Her second husband, Jim, whom she married after leaving the sect, provides support. (RNS photo/Olivia Bucks/The Oregonian)

“Virtually every abuse victim feels alone,” said David Clohessy, national director of St. Louis-based Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

“But I believe that no victim feels more alone than somebody abused by a religious figure or in a religious setting. The most universal source of comfort and solace in painful times is God. But if God is perceived to be an integral part of one’s abuse and cover-up, victims are left with virtually nowhere to turn.”

Among members of his organization, comprising people who’ve been sexually abused by priests, “many—not most, but many—victims have found their way back to some kind of spirituality. But almost never without first enduring a long, painful period of alienation and uncertainty around even the existence of God.”

For Elishah Franckiewicz, the first child born in Alamo’s compound, recovery is about building her own system of beliefs, something she was denied as a child.

Franckiewicz, now a 37-year-old college instructor in the Portland area, escaped when she was 15. When she left, she said, she had no reference point for what was right and wrong, true or untrue.

Franckiewicz and other compound children were told that if they prayed hard enough, Alamo’s wife, Susan, who died from cancer after the compound moved to Arkansas, would rise from the dead. Each day she did not awaken, the children were beaten.

With the help and love of her husband, who rescued her from the compound in a dramatic escape, she slowly rebuilt her life by facing her fears and investigating the world. But she lost her faith in God.

“I believe in my family,” she says. “And I believe in me.”

Bach was 17 and living alone in Los Angeles when she first met Tony Alamo's followers. She says she visited the couple's church in Hollywood "mostly out of curiosity."

Bach didn't have a religious upbringing, but she thirsted for spiritual guidance.

While attending one of the Alamos' church services, Bach says, she had a "very real born-again experience." She threw her last \$3 in the collection plate and accepted an invitation to join the compound, which then was in Saugus, Calif.

Very quickly, she said, she was stripped of her identity. Followers worked for businesses owned by the Alamos or on nearby farms and lived in sex-segregated dormitories. They were told what to wear, what to say and what to think. All meals were served in a cafeteria with no choices. She said anyone could be publicly rebuked without warning, and most of the followers "lived in constant fear."

"I couldn't talk about this for years. It was so traumatic for me that I couldn't talk about it."

Seven years ago, she became "plagued with panic attacks." A therapist diagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder, and told Bach she'd been stuffing down her feelings so long that, like too many books on a shelf, everything just collapsed.

She wanted to rebuild, but she was missing something crucial—her faith.

"I feel like I was spiritually raped."

Bach continues to struggle. "It's day by day," she says.

"I long to believe, but I just can't."

