# Recognize the Multi-Level Marketed Church

*A practical guide to recognizing coercive religious influence, auditing structure and evidence, protecting people, and building accountable alternatives*

**Purpose and boundaries**

This guide describes patterns that can occur in religious, nonprofit, volunteer, mentoring, and leadership settings. It does not diagnose people, determine criminal liability, or label every committed faith community as abusive. The goal is to help readers slow down, document observable facts, protect safety, and seek independent review when power is being used to silence, pressure, isolate, or control.


**Created by Oklahoma Child Wellbeing**

www.okchildwellbeing.org

## How to use this guide

Start with observable behavior and verifiable structure, not labels. A single red flag may be poor practice. A repeated pattern across authority, money, information, relationships, and retaliation deserves closer review. Keep notes factual: who, what, when, where, what was said or done, what records exist, and what happened after someone raised concern.

### Core sections

- What “MLM-like” means in this guide - an organizational pattern, not an allegation of a business model or crime.
- The strategy: recruitment, hierarchy, dependency, information control, extraction, and reputation defense.
- Recognition: language, behavior, leadership practices, money, family dynamics, and retaliation signals.
- Physical evidence audit: documents, financial patterns, communications, personnel practices, and network maps.
- What healthy structure should look like: independent governance, safe reporting, transparency, and meaningful correction.
- What to do: safety planning, preservation, reporting options, support, and recovery-oriented next steps.

**Important safety note**

Do not confront a powerful leader alone, publicly disclose private records, or investigate outside your role when doing so could create danger, job loss, housing instability, immigration risk, custody risk, stalking, or retaliation. Build a safety plan first. If there is immediate danger, contact emergency services. For crisis support in the United States, call or text 988.

## 1. What “MLM-like” means here

The comparison is about a pattern of power and incentives, not about a legal conclusion. In an MLM-like spiritual structure, influence often moves upward while money, labor, loyalty, information, and risk move downward. People closest to the top receive status, access, protection, and decision-making authority; people below are encouraged to recruit, give, serve, defend the system, and tolerate personal cost in exchange for belonging, recognition, proximity, or the hope of future advancement.

## 2. The strategy: how the pattern can operate

| Stage | What it can look like | Why it creates control |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 1. Idealized entry | Heavy love-bombing, dramatic testimony, fast inclusion, praise for “hunger,” access to insiders, or promises of special purpose. | Belonging is created before the person has enough information to assess risk. |
| 2. Identity binding | Faithfulness becomes tied to the group, leader, mentor, program, or “covering.” Leaving is framed as betrayal, rebellion, pride, or spiritual danger. | The person begins to experience disagreement as a threat to identity, salvation, family, or future. |
| 3. Rank and access | Inner circles, favored families, leadership tracks, invitation-only meetings, special prayer lines, VIP access, titles, and proximity to the leader. | Status becomes a currency. People may compete for access instead of asking whether the system is safe. |
| 4. Recruitment and labor | Members are urged to bring friends, recruit volunteers, share content, fill seats, support campaigns, or defend the organization online. | The base expands the leader’s reach while the labor and reputational risk stay with members. |
| 5. Extraction | Repeated giving, “seed” language, purchases, travel, unpaid work, conference fees, loyalty gifts, or pressure to prove commitment through sacrifice. | Cost is normalized while financial or decision-making information remains concentrated at the top. |
| 6. Information control | Discouraging outside sources, defining all critics as enemies, limiting who may ask questions, restricting access to records, or telling people not to “gossip.” | People lose comparison points and are less able to test claims independently. |
| 7. Discipline and defense | Public shaming, loss of platform, loss of work, removal from groups, social exclusion, threats of spiritual consequence, or coordinated reputation defense. | The consequences of questioning teach everyone else to stay quiet. |
| 8. Reset and repeat | A crisis is reframed as persecution, isolated misconduct, a misunderstanding, or proof the group is “under attack.” | The system preserves itself without resolving the underlying conditions. |

## 3. What it looks like in everyday language and behavior

### High-control phrases worth pausing on

- “Do not touch the anointed” used to stop questions about conduct, money, or safety.
- “Unity” used to require silence rather than honest process.
- “Submit,” “covering,” “honor,” or “loyalty” used without reciprocal accountability.
- “You are offended,” “bitter,” “divisive,” or “in rebellion” used instead of answering specifics.
- “God told me” used to override consent, professional advice, a boundary, or a person’s own discernment.
- “Protect the witness,” “protect the ministry,” or “do not give the enemy ammunition” used to conceal harm.
- “Your blessing is connected to your giving” used to pressure financial decisions or shame hardship.
- “Stay within the house” used to discourage independent counsel, reporting, or outside support.

### Behavioral warning signs

- Questions are permitted only when they lead to agreement; repeated questions are treated as character defects.
- The same inner circle investigates complaints against itself, its relatives, its donors, or its leadership friends.
- People with direct knowledge leave quietly, are discredited, or become “unsafe” to contact.
- A person’s role, social standing, employment, access to children, housing, or family relationships changes after raising a concern.
- Leadership receives special exceptions to policies applied to everyone else.
- Members are asked to resolve serious harm privately when the issue involves child safety, crime, coercion, abuse, financial irregularity, or professional misconduct.
- Public storytelling celebrates sacrifice, but financial, governance, and complaint data are absent or inaccessible.
- The organization measures attendance, giving, growth, and loyalty but not safety, retention, complaint outcomes, or retaliation.

## 4. The physical-evidence audit: how to look for imbalance

Do not rely only on charisma, testimony, or rumor. Compare what the organization says with how power, money, work, access, and consequences are actually distributed. A pattern is stronger when more than one independent source points in the same direction.

| Area | Records to review | Imbalance indicators | Questions to ask |
|---|---|---|---|
| Governance | Bylaws, board roster, meeting minutes, conflict disclosures, policy manuals, annual reports. | Board members are relatives, employees, donors, close friends, or dependent on leader approval; no documented recusals. | Who can overrule the leader? Who appoints or removes board members? Who investigates the board? |
| Money | Public filings where applicable, budgets, compensation approvals, expense policies, vendor invoices, travel or event costs, fundraising materials. | High-pressure giving paired with low transparency; leader-adjacent vendors; personal benefit hidden inside organizational spending. | Who approves compensation and related-party transactions? Are records available? |

| Area | Records to review | Imbalance indicators | Questions to ask |
|---|---|---|---|
| Labor | Volunteer schedules, job descriptions, payroll/contractor records, program fees, event requirements. | Unpaid labor is framed as spiritual duty; favors and access depend on service; workers cannot raise concerns safely. | What work is expected? Who benefits? Can someone decline without penalty? |
| Complaints | Intake forms, hotline records, investigation policy, timelines, outcome notices, retaliation reports. | No independent reporting route; complaints routed to accused or allies; no tracking of outcomes. | Who receives reports? What happens next? Is there an appeal? |
| Communication | Emails, texts, messages, livestreams, meeting notes, social posts, recordings lawfully obtained. | Coordinated talking points; pressure to delete; shifting stories; vague denials rather than factual answers. | What was said at the time? Who was copied? What changed after a report? |
| Networks | Public rosters, entity filings, donor/vendor relationships, leadership biographies, event programs. | Family and business ties overlap with oversight; the same circle controls money, discipline, and public messaging. | Which people occupy multiple roles? Who has a direct relationship with whom? |

### Simple network-map exercise

- Write the organization in the center. Around it, list board members, senior staff, legal counsel, financial decision-makers, pastors/mentors, major donors, vendors, family members, and investigators.
- Draw lines for family, employment, business, friendship, housing, romantic, mentorship, church, or financial relationships.
- Circle any person who holds more than one form of power: hiring, firing, discipline, money approval, complaint intake, investigation, media response, or spiritual authority.
- Ask whether a reasonable outside person would see independence. If not, the process needs outside oversight.

## 4A. Money, family privilege, and unequal employment: where the pattern becomes visible

Financial pressure is not automatically exploitation, and family employment is not automatically improper. The concern is the pattern: people with the least power are repeatedly asked to give more, work more, wait longer, or accept less, while money, access, titles, jobs, and exceptions concentrate around a protected inner circle. The question is not whether a leader or relative has resources. The question is whether the organization uses spiritual pressure to extract sacrifice from people in need while shielding insiders from ordinary transparency, oversight, or equal standards.

### What this can look like

- Members may be encouraged to give despite financial hardship - including limited funds needed for housing, food, medical care, debt obligations, emergency savings, or children's needs - while giving is framed as a test of faith, obedience, blessing, healing, promotion, or protection. This is a concern when a person cannot decline without shame, pressure, loss of standing, or fear of spiritual consequences.
- Visible personal wealth, expensive travel, high-value homes or vehicles, luxury goods, private transportation, or unusually high compensation do not by themselves establish misconduct. They do, however, warrant transparency when the surrounding community is experiencing unmet needs or when members are being asked to make sacrificial gifts. The concern is heightened when questions about stewardship are treated as a spiritual defect rather than answered through records, independent review, and clear policy.
- Relatives, close friends, or favored insiders receive jobs, higher compensation, flexible schedules, titles, travel opportunities, housing help, contracts, board seats, or access to decision-makers that are unavailable through a transparent job process.
- A family member or close associate supervises, evaluates, disciplines, hires, pays, or investigates people despite an obvious conflict of interest.
- Job expectations are unequal: some staff are expected to work unpaid overtime, be available after hours, perform personal errands, recruit others, or accept blurred ministry and employment boundaries, while insiders receive exceptions.
- Access is based on surname, relationship, donor status, loyalty, or proximity to leadership rather than written job duties, competency, experience, performance standards, or a fair hiring process.
- People are told there is "no money" for wages, safety measures, professional help, or survivor support while resources are available for insider compensation, branding, travel, legal defense, favored vendors, or private benefits.
- Financial questions are reframed as rebellion, bitterness, dishonor, envy, or lack of faith rather than answered with records, policies, independent review, and clear explanations.

### Gifts of need, jewelry, and family heirlooms

Generosity should be voluntary, informed, and handled with transparent safeguards. A faith community may receive cash, property, jewelry, or other gifts, but it should never rely on spiritual pressure, desperation, or a person's fear of disappointing God or leadership.

- People may be told that if they do not have cash, they should give "what they do have." In a high-pressure environment, this can include jewelry, wedding rings, watches, vehicles, tools, family heirlooms, or other items with emotional or practical value.

- The ethical concern is not the existence of an in-kind gift. The concern is whether the donor understood the decision, had meaningful freedom to decline, received a written receipt and valuation information where appropriate, and knew exactly how the item would be safeguarded, sold, retained, or used.
- A serious red flag arises when donated jewelry, heirlooms, or other valuables are later retained, repurposed, worn, fitted, transferred, or otherwise used by leaders, relatives, staff, or favored insiders without a documented gift-acceptance policy, independent approval, donor acknowledgment, asset log, and transparent disposition process.
- No person should be pressured to give items essential to their safety, livelihood, health, transportation, housing, family stability, or cultural and personal identity. No one should be told that withholding a gift proves disloyalty, lack of faith, or resistance to God.

### Spiritualized claims of provision and personal benefit

Faith language about provision is common in religious life. The ethical concern arises when a leader or organization repeatedly presents another person's money, labor, property, vehicle, professional skill, or personal asset as something God has specifically assigned to the leader, the leader's family, or the organization - especially when the message is directed toward people who are financially vulnerable, dependent on the organization, or seeking spiritual approval.

- Examples may include statements such as: “God is sending people to help me with the ministry,” “God is sending people with money to help me,” “God is sending me property,” or “God is sending me cars.” A spiritual belief or testimony is not, by itself, evidence of wrongdoing. The concern is whether such statements are repeatedly used to create pressure, imply a divine obligation, or make refusal feel like disobedience to God.
- This pattern can blur the line between a voluntary gift and a spiritually coerced transfer of money, labor, property, or access. It may be especially concerning when the requested benefit appears to serve a leader's personal lifestyle, family network, private business interests, or favored insiders rather than a clearly documented charitable or ministry purpose.
- A healthy organization does not treat a donor, volunteer, employee, or member as a source of divinely assigned resources for a particular leader. It makes clear that giving is voluntary, that people may decline without consequence, and that no person's spiritual standing, access, employment, family relationships, or place in the community depends on meeting a leader's personal or organizational request.

#### What to document and ask

- Record the exact words used, the date, the audience, the resource requested or implied, and whether the message was public, private, repeated, or directed at a person known to be vulnerable or dependent.
- Ask whether requests for money, property, vehicles, housing, labor, or other assets are approved through written policy, independent financial oversight, conflict-of-interest review, and documented charitable purpose.
- Ask whether the organization distinguishes between gifts to the organization and gifts that benefit a leader, family member, staff member, or insider. Where personal benefit is involved, the transaction should be separately reviewed, documented, and disclosed as required.

- Look for whether people who decline are treated differently: reduced access, public shaming, loss of opportunity, pressure through family or mentors, altered work expectations, or suggestions that they have failed spiritually.

### “Stretch,” increase, and sacrificial-giving language: when encouragement becomes pressure

Faith communities often use language about growth, sacrifice, generosity, and spiritual preparation. Such language is not inherently improper. The concern arises when a leader repeatedly connects a person’s financial giving, volunteer labor, or willingness to endure discomfort with promised spiritual advancement, material increase, access, healing, protection, or belonging - especially when people are already under financial, emotional, or relational strain.

- Examples may include phrases such as “stretch to break forth,” “stretching prepares you,” “you will not increase unless you sacrificially give,” “uncomfortable giving multiplies your seed,” or analogies suggesting that stretching improves circulation so a person can “run” into a new season. These statements may be offered as motivational metaphors. They become ethically concerning when they are repeatedly used to direct people toward money, valuables, labor, or personal sacrifice for the benefit of leadership or the organization.
- Statements that giving “does not cost you anything,” or that a gift will inevitably make a person into something greater, can minimize a donor’s actual hardship. A person may be deciding between a contribution and rent, food, medicine, transportation, child care, debt payments, or emergency savings. Ethical stewardship requires leaders to acknowledge those realities and make clear that basic safety and family stability should not be jeopardized.
- A promise or implication that God will multiply a person’s “seed” can be spiritually meaningful to some believers. It becomes problematic when presented as a predictable exchange, when a person is led to expect a specific material return, or when the message suggests that a lack of increase proves insufficient faith, generosity, or obedience.
- Questions such as “How would you pray for someone who never gives, never serves, or does not tithe?” can be used as a pastoral reflection. They become a concern when the question is used to define a person primarily by their contribution, encourage others to view noncontributors as spiritually deficient, justify reduced care or access, or create pressure through shame, comparison, or social isolation.

#### A professional and ethical pastoral standard

Pastoral care should not depend on donation history, volunteer output, family name, access to assets, or willingness to meet a leader’s request. A person who does not give, serve, or tithe should receive the same dignity, prayer, care, safety support, and opportunity for participation as any other person.

- A respectful pastoral response might be: “May this person have wisdom, safety, provision, healing, and freedom from shame or comparison. Their value and place in this community are not measured by money, service hours, or what they can provide.”
- Healthy leaders separate spiritual teaching from fundraising decisions. They explicitly state that giving and service are voluntary; do not ask people to harm their financial stability; do not promise particular returns; and do not treat declining as rebellion, lack of faith, or a reason for reduced access.

#### What to look for in practice

- Repeated sermons, private messages, fundraising campaigns, leadership training, or testimonials that tie personal sacrifice to promised increase, status, access, healing, or spiritual approval.

- Pressure directed toward people who are grieving, financially distressed, dependent on church employment or housing, seeking pastoral care, newly connected to the community, or attempting to gain belonging.
- Donation, attendance, service, or volunteer records being used - formally or informally - to decide who receives access, leadership roles, employment opportunities, counseling attention, introductions, platform time, or favorable treatment.
- Differences in how people are prayed for, discussed, mentored, or included after they decline to give, reduce volunteer hours, question a fundraising appeal, or ask for financial transparency.

#### Records and safeguards

- Preserve the exact language, date, audience, setting, request, and any stated or implied consequence. Save public recordings, written messages, campaign materials, pledge forms, receipts, and contemporaneous notes.
- Review whether the organization has written policies separating pastoral care from fundraising, protecting confidentiality, prohibiting retaliation, limiting donor-data access, and preventing staff or leaders from using contribution history to control employment, care, access, or discipline.
- Where a pattern appears, document it neutrally: describe the statement, the setting, the request, the recipient's circumstances, the resulting action, and any change in treatment. Do not characterize a belief as misconduct without evidence of coercion, unequal treatment, misuse of assets, or another identifiable breach of policy, law, or ethical duty.

### Community need and visible prosperity

A community may have leaders who are financially successful and members who are struggling; those facts alone do not prove wrongdoing. The question is whether the organization's stated mission, fundraising appeals, and use of resources align with the needs it says it exists to serve.

- Look for a sustained gap between public appeals for sacrifice and the lived conditions of people nearby: families unable to meet basic needs, workers underpaid, safety concerns unfunded, or community services unavailable while discretionary spending, insider benefits, or high-end lifestyle signals remain protected.
- When an organization asks people in hardship to give from need while leadership households or favored insiders appear to benefit from substantial assets, luxury spending, high-value homes, vehicles, travel, or preferential access, the responsible response is transparent governance - not speculation, retaliation, or demands for silence.
- Review whether there is a documented community-benefit strategy: emergency assistance, fair wages, service investments, hardship policies, transparent aid criteria, independent oversight, and reporting that shows how resources address the needs of the people being asked to support the mission.

### Physical evidence to examine

- Written job descriptions, posted openings, applicant criteria, interview notes, hiring panels, salary bands, wage records, promotions, performance reviews, disciplinary records, overtime rules, and volunteer agreements.
- Board rosters, governance charts, conflict-of-interest disclosures, recusal records, compensation approvals, related-party transaction records, vendor selection records, reimbursement policies, and meeting minutes.

- Public nonprofit filings where available, audited financial statements, annual reports, fundraising materials, building campaigns, loan records, property records, public procurement records, and public litigation or regulatory filings. Some churches are not required to file IRS Form 990; lack of a 990 alone is not proof of wrongdoing.
- Messages, announcements, sermons, videos, emails, giving campaigns, staff manuals, internal chats, and testimony requests that show how donations, labor, promotion, or loyalty were encouraged or pressured.
- A relationship map showing family, romantic, friendship, business, mentor, employment, donor, legal, and board connections among people who control compensation, hiring, investigations, discipline, or public response.
- Gift-acceptance policies, in-kind donation logs, receipts, valuation records, asset inventories, auction or resale records, board approvals, conflict-of-interest disclosures, and records showing who ultimately received or used donated property.
- Documented community-benefit spending, hardship-assistance criteria, employee wage and benefit data, local service investments, budget allocations, and explanations for major discretionary expenses, related-party benefits, or lifestyle-linked use of organizational resources.

### Questions that reveal imbalance

- Who sets compensation, approves raises, and reviews benefits for senior leaders and their relatives? Is that decision made by independent people without family, financial, or supervisory ties?
- Are openings posted? Are qualifications, interview standards, and pay ranges documented? Can an outside applicant realistically compete?
- Do people with the same job description, hours, responsibility, and experience receive materially different pay, access, titles, or flexibility? If so, what objective reason is documented?
- Is anyone asked to donate, volunteer, recruit, travel, or perform labor because they are told God requires it, while a leader or family member receives the economic benefit?
- What percentage of revenue goes to direct mission, fair employee compensation, safety systems, independent oversight, and aid for people in need versus insider compensation, related-party contracts, branding, travel, or discretionary spending?
- Can a member say “I cannot give right now” without being shamed, denied opportunity, treated as spiritually inferior, or pressured to disclose private finances?
- When leadership asks people to give out of need, does it disclose the leader's compensation, related-party benefits, debt obligations, major assets paid for by the organization, and the independent process used to oversee them?
- Does the organization have a written policy for non-cash gifts - including jewelry, heirlooms, vehicles, and other valuables - that requires receipts, asset tracking, independent approval, conflict disclosure, and transparent disposition?
- Can the organization show how giving appeals, compensation practices, aid programs, and discretionary spending are aligned with the actual needs of the community it serves?
- Are people free to decline a financial or in-kind gift without pressure, spiritual shaming, loss of access, loss of employment opportunity, or negative consequences for their family relationships?

### What a fair structure should require

- Written compensation and hiring policies with objective qualifications, posted roles where feasible, documented decisions, and regular equity review.

- Independent compensation review for top leaders, family members, board members, and related parties; anyone with a direct relationship must disclose the conflict and recuse from discussion and voting.
- Separate roles for spiritual leadership, human resources, finance, complaint intake, and investigations. One household or inner circle should not control all of them.
- No retaliation for declining to give, asking questions, applying for a job, reporting unfairness, or seeking independent advice.
- A written gift-acceptance and asset-disposition policy for cash and non-cash donations. It should prohibit personal use by leaders, relatives, staff, or insiders unless the transaction is independently reviewed, fully documented, and lawfully disclosed.
- Regular public-facing stewardship reporting that explains community benefit, hardship support, fair compensation, related-party safeguards, and how the organization evaluates whether resources are serving people rather than concentrating privilege.
- Clear separation between voluntary ministry participation and paid employment. People should not be coerced into unpaid labor, personal service, or fundraising as a condition of belonging, spiritual approval, or job security.

### Safe response when you notice a money or access pattern

1. Do not confront alone if there is a credible risk to your job, housing, immigration status, custody, education, health care, safety, or family relationships. Start with a personal safety plan.
2. Keep a factual comparison log: role, expected duties, hours, pay or benefits known to you lawfully, access granted or denied, who made the decision, exact statements, dates, and related records.
3. Preserve only records you are authorized to possess. Do not access private accounts, payroll systems, donor databases, staff files, or communications without permission.
4. Ask for written policies and written reasons. A careful, neutral request for the job description, compensation process, conflict policy, or reporting route often shows whether a real process exists.
5. Seek independent advice appropriate to the facts: employment counsel, a labor agency, a nonprofit governance professional, an accountant, a licensed therapist, an advocate, a regulator, or an attorney. This guide is educational and not legal, tax, financial, or clinical advice.
6. Use neutral language in reports: describe the policy, action, disparity, relationship, and record. Do not label a pattern as illegal or fraudulent unless an authorized body has made that finding.
7. When documenting concerns about valuables or lifestyle disparities, describe only what you can support: the request made, the item offered or donated, the written policy or absence of one, who had approval authority, what records exist, and what you personally observed. Avoid assumptions about ownership or intent without documentation.

## 5. What a healthy, accountable structure should look like

| High-control or MLM-like pattern | Healthy accountable alternative |
|---|---|
| Leader-centered authority with no meaningful check. | Independent board authority, documented governance, term limits or review mechanisms, and power to investigate leadership. |
| Friends, relatives, staff, donors, or loyal insiders review complaints. | Mandatory conflict disclosure and recusal; independent investigator/oversight for allegations involving leaders, family, staff, major donors, or prior decision-makers. |

| High-control or MLM-like pattern | Healthy accountable alternative |
|---|---|
| Informal “we handled it privately” response. | Written intake, safety assessment, scope, evidence log, timeline, outcome notice, and independent appeal or review route. |
| Information is restricted to protect image. | Privacy is respected while aggregate data, policy, governance, financial reporting, and corrective actions are transparently communicated. |
| Giving and service are treated as proof of faithfulness. | Giving and service are voluntary, clearly bounded, and never used to purchase belonging, forgiveness, status, or access. |
| People who leave are shamed or cut off. | People can leave without punishment; no-contact preferences are honored; former members are not targeted or discredited. |
| Child, survivor, or reporter safety is secondary to reputation. | Safety triage, mandated reporting where applicable, trauma-informed support, anti-retaliation steps, and outside referrals are built in. |
| Public relations is the response to harm. | Repair is the response: fact-finding, accountability, restitution where appropriate, policy change, follow-up, and measurement of whether conditions improve. |

## 6. What to do when you recognize the pattern

8. Slow the pace. Do not make high-stakes decisions while pressured, sleep-deprived, isolated, or afraid of losing community.
9. Write a factual timeline. Include dates, exact statements, names, events, witnesses, screenshots, financial requests, and what changed after you asked a question.
10. Preserve records safely. Keep originals, metadata where possible, and backups outside the organization. Do not alter documents or access systems you are not authorized to access.
11. Build a small independent support circle. Choose people who are not financially, socially, or spiritually dependent on the organization.
12. Get role-appropriate advice. This may include a licensed therapist, attorney, advocate, professional board, regulator, child-protection authority, accountant, or independent faith-safety consultant depending on the facts.
13. Use an independent reporting route when possible. Avoid reporting solely to the accused person, a family member, close friend, subordinate, donor, or anyone who helped make earlier decisions.
14. Set communication boundaries. Use written communication where practical, avoid private meetings, bring a support person, and ask for policies and decisions in writing.
15. Document retaliation. Record changed work hours, role removal, blocked access, threats, social exclusion, pressure on family, online attacks, or efforts to contact your employer, school, landlord, or relatives.
16. Prioritize safety and stabilization. A person can pursue truth without sacrificing housing, employment, custody, immigration status, health care, or physical safety. Make a plan before taking public action.
17. Decide deliberately whether and when to go public. Public disclosure is not the only path. Consider safety, evidence, privacy, legal risk, the impact on minors, and whether a responsible authority can act first.

## 7. Reporter and witness safety plan

### Before you report or confront

Choose a safe email or phone; change passwords and enable multi-factor authentication; save documents outside organization-owned devices; tell a trusted person where you will be; avoid meeting alone; consider transportation, childcare, housing, workplace, and family-contact risks; and identify what information can safely be shared now versus later.

- Use the minimum necessary identifying information. Do not publish a minor's name, address, school, medical detail, private message, or identifying image without legal and safety review.
- Separate facts from interpretation: "On May 4, I was removed from the volunteer roster after I emailed X" is stronger and safer than "They are a cult."
- Ask any reviewer: Who will know I reported? Who can access my documents? What anti-retaliation steps exist? What happens if the accused is a leader or family member?
- Keep a retaliation log with date, action, person involved, witnesses, record available, immediate impact, and next safe step.
- Get emergency help when there are threats, stalking, violence, child danger, coercive control, or credible fear of harm. In the U.S., call 911 for immediate danger or 988 for crisis support.

## 8. Questions that test whether accountability is real

- Can a person report a concern without first obtaining permission from the leader, mentor, supervisor, spouse, or inner circle?
- Does the organization have a written conflict-of-interest policy, and can you see documented recusals?
- Who investigates allegations against the highest-ranking leader, board member, family member, or major donor?
- Are the reporter and responding person both treated with fairness, safety, privacy, and a chance to provide relevant evidence?
- Is there a documented safety assessment when the report involves a child, survivor, employee, volunteer, or dependent adult?
- Are donors, volunteers, and staff informed about how money, compensation, related-party transactions, and vendor decisions are overseen?
- Can former members leave without shaming, blacklisting, contact pressure, or loss of access to necessities?
- Are outcomes measured beyond attendance and giving - including complaint response times, substantiated policy gaps, corrective action completion, and retaliation concerns?
- Does the organization provide independent referral options, or does it direct people only to its own leaders and approved professionals?
- When facts are disputed, is the response to obtain independent evidence - or to demand loyalty and control the story?

## 9. What people often miss

- Intergenerational leverage: relatives may be pressured through a parent, spouse, child, grandparent, or employer relationship rather than directly.
- Economic dependence: housing, tuition, childcare, work, transportation, food, immigration sponsorship, or medical support can turn "voluntary" participation into coercion.
- Digital control: group chats, private apps, livestream clips, deleted posts, screenshot pressure, doxxing risk, and coordinated online defense may be part of the power system.
- Gender, race, disability, immigration, and class dynamics: a person may be labeled "difficult" when they are naming unequal treatment or asking for basic procedural fairness.
- The harm of false balance: giving every powerful person equal access to the process can expose a survivor or reporter to further harm. Fairness requires equal standards, not equal power.
- The difference between confidentiality and secrecy: confidentiality protects people and evidence; secrecy protects unaccountable power.
- The difference between forgiveness and access: forgiveness, faith, or reconciliation should never be used to bypass safety, accountability, restitution, or boundaries.

## 10. Documentation template

| Record | What to capture |
|---|---|
| Incident timeline | Date/time, location, people present, exact words/actions, immediate impact, follow-up. |
| Evidence log | File/item name, date created/received, source, original |

| Record | What to capture |
|---|---|
| | location, copy location, relevance, access limits. |
| Relationship map | Role, organization, family/work/business/mentorship ties, conflict concern, recusal needed. |
| Safety/retaliation log | Threat or change, date, person involved, witnesses, evidence, impact, safety response. |
| Policy comparison | What policy promises, what happened, who decided, whether exceptions were documented. |
| Outcome tracker | Who owns next step, deadline, evidence of completion, whether conditions actually improved. |

## Closing perspective

A healthy faith community can have deep commitment, strong belief, service, mentoring, generosity, and leadership without demanding silence or dependency. The test is not whether people are passionate. The test is whether power is accountable, questions are safe, money and authority are transparent, families and reporters are protected, and the organization corrects harm even when correction costs status, money, or reputation.

### For Oklahoma Child Wellbeing

Every person seen. Every person safe. This guide is educational and does not replace legal advice, crisis intervention, mandated reporting duties, clinical care, or an official investigation.