

**REPORT OF UTAH STATE TASK  
FORCE ON RITUAL ABUSE**

**MAY 1992**

## COMMITTEE

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## BACKGROUND

The Task Force on Ritual Abuse was created in March 1990 by the Utah Governor's Commission for Women and Families in conjunction with members of the Utah State Task Force on Child Sexual Abuse. A few months prior, the issues of ritual abuse in Utah were brought to the attention of members at a meeting of the Child Sexual Abuse Task Force; since that committee had been operating for some time and was well into its work, members agreed that a separate group should be formed which could study the issue.

Dr. Noemi Mattis, representing the Commission for Women and Families, and Mrs. Aileen Clyde, from the State Task Force on Child Sexual Abuse, were named co-chairs. Additional members were appointed by Dr. Mattis and Mrs. Clyde in conjunction with Mrs. Kathleen Mason, chair of the Commission for Women and Families; Mrs. Grethe Peterson, chair of the State Task Force on Child Sexual Abuse, and Dr. Olene Walker, chair of the Commission on Criminal and Juvenile Justice. The membership included a broad spectrum of the community: a physician, a judge, representatives from social services and other state agencies, a representative from the Attorney General's Office, police investigators, attorneys, mental-health professionals, educators, elected officials, representatives from the state PTA and from a number of churches, as well as interested citizens experienced in task force work. Because of the sensitive nature of the topic, the committee decided to carry out its work with discretion and appropriate confidentiality.

## MISSION STATEMENT

At its inception the Task Force set out to define specific goals. In September of 1990, they presented the following mission statement:

"The purposes of this committee are to:

1. Gather and analyze information about ritual abuse in Utah.
2. Sponsor responsible education of the public.
3. Assist in the education of professionals (physicians, law-enforcement personnel, court officers, child welfare personnel, mental health care professionals, educators, religious leaders and health care providers).
4. Suggest needed programs to public and private agencies.

We propose that the committee be set up on two levels:

1. A broadly representative advisory committee.

2. A smaller executive committee and other committees as needed. It is understood that the committee is solely concerned with criminal behavior. There is no intention to control or interfere with law-abiding alternative religious practices."

At the time the task force came together, some members had become convinced that ritual abuse in Utah was a serious problem demanding further investigation; others were skeptical about the reality of the issue; and a few were undecided on the matter. All, however, requested further clarification. Over the next weeks and months, they read literature in the subject which presented viewpoints from the legal, therapeutic, judicial and law enforcement communities, and they heard presentations from experts within the task force.

In addition, and particularly persuasive to the committee, were the testimonies of both adult survivors and of parents whose children had been ritually abused. The parents told of their bafflement about the children's symptoms and reported initial incredulity about their children's disclosures. They declared their frustration in trying to convince others of the seriousness and validity of the accounts. They also reported problems in finding appropriate therapy and, most notably, described the difficulties they found in dealing with the justice system.

## DEFINITION

Ritual abuse is a crime so bizarre as to be beyond the realm of comprehension for most thoughtful people. Its complex nature prohibits a simple definition. We suggest the following:

Ritual abuse is a brutal form of abuse of children, adolescents, and adults, consisting of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, and involving use of rituals. Ritual abuse rarely consists of a single episode. It usually involves repeated abuse over an extended period of time. The physical abuse is severe, including torture and sometimes killing. The sexual abuse is usually painful, sadistic, and humiliating. Ritual abuse is by definition not a crime of impulse, but a crime committed with malice aforethought.

## TYPES OF RITUAL GROUPS

In dealing with an issue as complex as ritual abuse, we must educate ourselves carefully in the accurate use of key terms. Let us consider the word "ritual." Most traditional religions practice well-known rituals of some sort (circumcision, baptism, confirmation, ordination). Some cults practice rituals **which, though perhaps strange to outsiders, are in no way criminal.** Moreover, the word "satanic" alone does not identify a group as criminal. For example, some self-proclaimed "satanists" present themselves as legitimate churches, are public in their beliefs, and generally claim disapproval of ritual crimes. Their right to worship is constitutionally

protected. Other groups criminally and even ritually abuse children without any genuine belief in the validity of rituals. These pseudo-satanists are adult pedophiles or purveyors of child pornography who use the trappings of satanism to terrify victims into silence. Criminal ritualistic abuse has been reported in the context of three different traditions: **satanism**, a reversal of Christianity in which members worship the anti-Christ; **deviant paganism**, or black magic, which is a reversal of white witchcraft; and **ceremonial magic**, which is a reversal of tribal religion. Satanists acknowledge the existence of both Christ and Satan and have chosen to worship the latter in the belief that through their efforts Satan will triumph over Christ. Still other groups are idiosyncratic, and some combine elements of the three traditions outlined.

Most secretive of the groups as described by survivors are the generational cults. Some scholars are convinced that such groups have existed for centuries. Usually, practitioners have been born into the belief system; members are abused from birth and eventually may become abusers. Their abusive cult activities may co-exist side by side with traditional worship; that is, members may publicly practice an established, respected religion. The members are often well-known and respected within their larger communities. These generational cults may recruit new members, often from among teenagers; yet the leadership roles remain within the family.

Teenagers and pre-teens may sometimes be involved in "fringe" forms of satanism, making an elaborate show of their activities as a form of adolescent rebellion. Some of these youth may commit minor criminal offenses; others may be more knowledgeable about the particular intricacies of satanism and may commit a wide variety of more serious criminal offenses. Some of these teenagers may later be recruited into the generational satanic cults and may then commit atrocities as part of their initiation.

## FORMS OF RITUAL ABUSE REPORTED BY VICTIMS

Though intermingled in practice, and difficult to document with tangible evidence, the kinds of abuse which people report can, for clarity's sake, be roughly divided into four categories:

1. Sexual abuse. Victims of ritual abuse, including children of the youngest ages, report being subject to bizarre, deviant, and extremely painful sexual activities. In addition to combinations of sexual intercourse—genital, anal, and oral—between child and adult (male or female) and child and child (forced), victims report being penetrated vaginally or rectally with objects, and sometimes being forced to submit to sexual activity with animals. Research findings based on accounts from survivors of ritual abuse indicate that bizarre and unnatural sexual acts are perpetrated as frequently as more common acts, which is not the case in non-ritual child abuse.
2. Physical abuse. Victims of ritual abuse, including children, are tortured in numerous ways. They are burned, beaten, cut, buried alive until consciousness is lost, covered with insects, locked in a freezer until unconscious, hung upside down, chained, carved upon, and made to

ingest vile matter, including blood, urine, and feces. In connection with sexual abuse, their bodies are often twisted and contorted for long periods of time. Survivors report being abused medically and subjected to electric shocks and drugs of all kinds.

3. Emotional abuse. Long-lasting emotional confusion and trauma result from the following kinds of emotional abuse as reported by victims: victims state they are forced to participate in various crimes, including sacrifice of animals (which may be the children's own pets); the torture and sometimes murder of babies, including, in some cases the infants of young girls required to bear children specifically for sacrifice; the torture and sometimes murder of adults; and the systematic disposal of bodies. Some victims report having been forced to choose which person would be the next sacrifice. The victims are repeatedly told that they are bad or evil, that it is their fault the baby or pet has to die, that no one will ever love them or believe them if they report any of the activities. In some instances, according to many reports, children involved in ritual activities are there because their parents are also part of the group and have forced their children to participate from earliest years. On the other hand, when children are involved without their parents' knowledge, those boys and girls are lied to, told that their parents actually do know about the cult's activities and have, in fact, given the group permission to indoctrinate the children, though this "agreement" must never be spoken of at home. Other children are told that if they disclose any information, their parents or siblings will be killed. According to many accounts, group leaders program children to believe that they are always watched. They teach children that no matter where they go, no matter who they are with, their actions and words - indeed, their very thoughts - are known to the group.

Another aspect of emotional abuse is dual socialization of participants, which means that although outwardly they have the social values of the community at large, another set of values is being taught by the group. These are inverted values, standard values turned upside down: doctrines which teach that pain is good, torture is good, lying for the cause is righteous, human life is a cheap commodity, and so forth.

Victims report subjection to prolonged and carefully structured mind control or programming. They are conditioned to deny involvement with criminal abuse, to tell conflicting stories, or to retract stories previously reported, to harm themselves if they so much as think about telling anyone of the cult's activities. Moreover, they are convinced that group members have the power to harm them, even by remote control, if they divulge information.

4. Spiritual abuse. Some deviant cult groups make a point of distorting religious ceremonies. They will mock the predominant church group of the area, for example, doing "black Masses" and other distortions of the traditional service in Catholic locales. In ritual abuse groups practicing in predominantly Mormon areas, LDS ceremonies are copied, distorted, and sadistically profaned. Scriptures and other religious wordings are perverted. Ritual group members are subjected to experiences that mock not only baptism, but marriage and other ordinances; when these victims are later involved in the legitimate services of the benign religion, their programmed terror is triggered, and the baptism or wedding becomes a nightmare. Repeatedly, victims report being taught that God does not love them (the proof being that He

does not rescue them), that Satan alone has power to save them, and that no one outside the ritual group will ever truly love or trust them.

### SUPPORT FOR VICTIMS' ALLEGATIONS

The nature of ritual abuse, and of the secret groups involved, must be considered in any discussion about evidence. Perpetrators maintain prolonged concealment, not only of their acts, but also of their membership in the secret society which is united in the commission of crimes. For many, their continued existence as successful, prestigious, and powerful persons in outer society depends upon absolute secrecy of the inner group activities. Survivors report that such groups are extremely careful and highly skilled in destroying evidence of their crimes.

What we do have as evidence are the accounts of victims. However, some victims can access only fragmentary memories of events that occurred years ago; some victims may dissociate (block the memories) or appear incoherent and therefore be considered unreliable witnesses. Moreover, the events they recount are so far beyond the bounds of normal experience or even imagination that they are regarded as fantasy. Because of reported threats of torture or death (for themselves or those they love) if they should tell of their experiences, victims greatly fear exposure, even to police, social service workers, and court officials. Some parents whose children make disclosures of ritual abuse may choose to move elsewhere without reporting the crime in order to protect their children from further trauma or danger.

Despite all of these factors which make the accumulation of a hard data base very difficult, there is a growing pattern of information being gathered and analyzed. The task force submits the following points of evidence from local and national sources:

- Independent identification, by victims unknown to each other, of the same perpetrators.
- Reports of recent ritual abuse strikingly similar in their particulars to the abuse remembered by adult survivors whose trauma was perpetrated decades ago.
- Independent detailed reports, in many different states and in foreign countries, of identical acts of ritual abuse.
- Successful prosecution of cases of child abuse which contain indisputable elements of ritual abuse.
- Perhaps most persuasive of all, documentation from mental health professionals throughout the nation showing that patients get well when their memories of ritual abuse are dealt with, even patients who have not responded to years of other therapy.

## LEGISLATIVE CONCERNS

The task force established a sub-committee to study the Utah Criminal Code and determine if additional legislation was needed to assist law enforcement in the prosecution of perpetrators of ritual abuse. With the assistance of legislative counsel, they conducted a survey of the laws of other states that deal with ritual abuse. They studied the comprehensive ritual abuse legislation passed in Idaho in 1990, as well as legislation passed in Texas, Louisiana, and Illinois, and compared them to Utah's sexual abuse statutes, including the provision defining and prohibiting aggravated sexual abuse of a child (Utah Code Annotated, 76-5-404.1. 1953)

The sub-committee and the task force met with the line prosecutors for the Office of the Attorney General to determine if members of that office had perceived any inadequacies in the present Utah Criminal Code which would preclude a successful prosecution of a ritual abuse case. The Attorney General did not suggest any changes to existing law at this time.

The sub-committee and the task force concluded that the present criminal code addressed the most serious aspects of ritual abuse and provided for severe penalties. As the system prosecutes new cases for child or ritual abuse, it will be possible to monitor the effectiveness of the Utah statutes dealing with these crimes. The task force recommended periodic reviews and consideration of the need for additional legislation and/or amendments as new evidence becomes available.

## INVESTIGATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

The task force heard from victims' parents who were concerned about the trauma their children experienced in the investigative process. Investigative protocol was addressed by a task force sub-committee, as well as by the State Task Force on Child Sexual Abuse. Improvements are expected as a result of the opening of the Children's Justice Centers in three locations within the state. Additional education and training of investigators is essential, however, if this crucial phase of the solution is to move ahead. The sub-committee determined that sufficient protocols already exist for the investigation of ritual abuse, making new ones unnecessary if the present protocols are widely followed.

What is needed are special officers charged with statewide investigation of ritual abuse allegations. A proposal was made to the Governor and the Attorney General that funds be appropriated to the Attorney General for this purpose, as the Attorney General's Office is the only law enforcement/prosecutorial agency with statewide jurisdiction. The proposed investigative effort could best be administered within the existing Child Abuse Prosecution Assistance Unit of that office. Governor Bangerter agreed with this proposal and recommended an appropriation of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars to the Attorney General's office to fund this investigative effort.

Investigation of this type of criminal activity is difficult and time-consuming, requiring full-



time, dedicated work. Personnel must be trained and experienced in both child abuse and ritual abuse investigations. The precise personnel, training and equipment allocations of the funds dedicated to this cause should be left to the discretion of the Attorney General.

## COURTROOM CONCERNS

Our justice system is rightfully concerned with protection of the innocent as well as prosecution of the guilty. The legal procedures designed to balance these concerns, prosecution and protection, are not easily maintained in the investigation of ritual abuse. In the area of substantive law, the Rules of Evidence and traditional legal training have made prosecutions of ritual abuse particularly difficult. Judges and lawyers are trained in and constrained by the Rules of Evidence to determine whether a witness is telling the truth. The tests, however, do not serve well in the circumstances of ritual abuse prosecutions.

Evidentiary problems peculiar to ritual abuse include:

- imperiled witnesses.
- systematic and skillful destruction of physical evidence.
- a "cold trail" due to the passage of time, some cases being reported years after the fact.
- survivors whose credibility is weak, sometimes simply because they are children; sometimes because they are adults who suffer from multiple personality disorder and thus seem less than perfectly coherent; and sometimes, ironically, because they seem to be functioning very well with no outward signs to substantiate their victimization in the eyes of the untrained observer.
- accounts that are inconsistent or contradictory because survivors of ritual abuse may have been programmed to lie, to deny previous disclosures, to change details of previous accounts, and otherwise muddy their reports.
- recollections of ritual abuse that may have been hypnotically accessed in therapy and may be discounted on that basis alone.

All of these factors cloud the determination of truth as judged by traditional rules and gauges. In addition, parents of child abuse victims reported concern about the courtroom and trial process per se, with accusers and accused in the same room, perhaps even at the same table. Parents also object to problematic questioning procedures and techniques.

The task force appointed a sub-committee to evaluate current court procedures and rules and recommend any changes which would more satisfactorily address matters involving claims of

ritual abuse. The sub-committee concluded that no changes to the court procedures are necessary to bring these crimes to trial, and that the major need was for education and training, especially for prosecutors. Well-trained prosecutors could request, and in most cases be granted, protective procedures from the court. In the view of the sub-committee, the advocates in a given case are the appropriate parties to request special procedures or arrangements. A network of prosecutors informed and experienced in the law relating to ritual abuse would be the surest means to justice for the child victims. That expertise and knowledge currently exist, and additional judicial training and education should be implemented.

The Task Force suggests that the following questions be addressed:

1. How can the Rules of Evidence be applied to accommodate ritual abuse cases?
2. In ritual abuses cases, what accommodations can be made in the standard courtroom process to better serve the ends of justice?
3. Should the present court exclusion of hypnotically accessed information be reassessed?
4. Are traditional courts of law the most appropriate forum for the resolution of these matters, or should alternatives be sought?

Further work and consideration by legal and judicial authorities will be required to address these issues.

### PROFESSIONAL TRAINING IN THE MENTAL HEALTH FIELDS

The training of therapists in ritual abuse background and treatment of survivors is being undertaken by independent groups, as well as by members of this task force acting in different capacities. We find, however, that there is a special need for education and training of public agency mental health staff. Many ritual abuse survivors deal with their abuse by developing a multiple personality disorder. (Many research scholars have reported on this phenomenon; see, for instance, Robert S. Mayer's book Satan's Children: Case Studies in Multiple Personality.) Victims of ritual abuse who develop multiple personality disorder often have difficulty finding appropriate treatment. Dissociative disorders, particularly in children, are little understood and inadequately recognized. The task force recommends that the State Division of Mental Health and the State Hospital train mental health clinical staff in the accurate diagnosis and effective treatment of multiple personality disorder and the effects of ritual abuse.

The state Division of Family Services has asked the School of Social Work at the University of Utah to establish training sessions in understanding ritual abuse for all child welfare workers in the state, with presenters traveling around the state for maximum accessibility.

The Task Force believes that specific training should be funded and scheduled not only for mental health professionals but for those in health care occupations generally, for law enforcement agencies and for all those involved with public education, whether as teachers, administrators, or members of Parent-Teacher Associations.

## PUBLIC EDUCATION

In its mission statement, the Task Force was charged with gathering and analyzing information about ritual abuse in Utah, suggesting needed programs to public and private agencies, and sponsoring and facilitating responsible education of both the public at large and individual professional groups whose work obligates them to be informed on this crime. The major part of this report has been given to our findings on ritual abuse and our suggestions for public and private agencies.

Concerning the education of the public, we note that over the past two years, various Task Force members have participated in panels and symposia on television, in university settings and elsewhere, and have granted extended interviews to newspaper reporters in order to provide information on the realities of ritual abuse, as the Task Force has come to understand the phenomenon. Lengthy newspaper coverage, in a series of articles, have appeared. Two Task Force members have written chapters on ritual abuse for a forthcoming book on domestic violence.

While we cannot know for certain the previous views of the public, a respected poll indicates that as of 1992, 90% of the Utah citizenry do believe that "ritualistic child sexual abuse is occurring" and 68% want the Attorney General's budget increased "to provide for more investigation." (Poll conducted by Dan Jones & Associates, reported in Deseret News, January 1, 1992, pp. A1-A2.)

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