

Premium NEWS

Former Young Life members across the US say they experienced sexual misconduct at the teen mega-ministry



Brie Boatman at her home in Dallas, Texas. Boatman left Young Life after she said the ministry mishandled her sexual misconduct allegations. "Women are not safe in this ministry if Young Life is going to listen to our stories and do nothing about it," she said. Zerin Mellish for Insider



Rachel Premack

15 minutes ago



One snowy Monday in 2016, a local leader at America's 11th largest ministry drove to pick up a 15-year-old high-school student. The teenage girl thought of the ministry, Young Life, as her "home away from home." She ate dinner and played games there, and found mentors who could help her navigate life as the child of immigrants.

She considered the 20-year-old local leader, Joseph Anderson, to be a good person. Nicknamed "Jojoedope," Anderson was beloved in

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the girl's community or North Minneapolis, one of the city's most disadvantaged neighborhoods. He helped referee basketball games and volunteered at local day camps. When the girl's regular mentor, a woman, wasn't able to drive her to Young Life meetings anymore, she didn't think twice when Anderson offered to pick her up.

But on that fall day, she says, Anderson took the high-school sophomore back to his house to wait out the few hours between the end of school and the start of what members called "club." No one was home.

Anderson put a television stand in front of his front door, the woman told Insider. Then he got on top of her and started to kiss her, she said.

"I was young, I had no idea what was going on," the woman, now 21, said. "I was petrified." (She did not want her name to be used in this story, but her identity is known to Insider.)

When Anderson pulled out a condom, she knew she had to escape, she said. She bit his lip as hard as she could, grabbed her backpack, and ran out.

Then she walked the rest of the way to club.



Young Life's corporate headquarters in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The ministry is the No. 11 largest in the US, according to watchdog group Ministry Watch. Caleb Alvarado for Insider

According to Young Life, roughly 400,000 students worldwide attend its meetings each week. The organization aims to bring Jesus Christ to "all young people, wherever they live or whomever they are." The ideal Young Life leader cultivates authentic relationships with local teens, promotes them into ministry leadership roles, and quietly establishes a culture that discourages drinking, premarital sex, and homosexuality and emphasizes traditional gender roles. A common refrain among male members is "Young Life, find a wife"; for women, the mantra is "club, find a hub."

According to Ministry Watch, a watchdog organization focused on faith-based nonprofits, Young Life generated over \$441 million in

income in 2017, more than Habitat for Humanity International and the YMCA combined. The vast majority of its revenue comes from donations by former members, many of whom also go on to become one of the organization's 52,000 volunteers.

The numbers underscore a sentiment frequently repeated by current and former members: The ministry often forms the entirety of a young person's social network and helps shape their identity.

But according to some in the organization, Young Life has also been a setting rife with sexual harassment and assault of both student members and volunteers, often at the hands of peers or adults they trusted. Ten women contacted by Insider said they experienced sexual misconduct — including sexual assault, unwanted touching, and unwanted sexual attention — while participating in Young Life activities. When made aware of these allegations, either formally or informally, the organization's local or national leadership ignored or mishandled their complaints, the women said. After reporting their experiences internally, at least one lost her position within the organization and two others were suspended. Some said they were asked to forgive their alleged assailants, while others said they were cast out by those they considered friends and role models. They come from across the country, including Texas, Michigan, and Colorado.

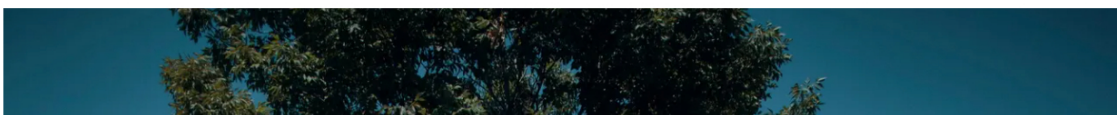
Alongside interviews with more than two dozen former Young Life members and experts in faith-based sexual trauma, as well as internal documents and public financial records, their stories paint a picture of an organization that can help adolescents navigate life, but has also failed to protect teenagers and employees from sexual misconduct.

In Minneapolis, the young woman who accused Joseph Anderson of assault said she told two Young Life leaders about the incident shortly afterward. (In an interview, a friend with whom the young woman shared her story at the time corroborated her account of that day.)

According to the Minneapolis woman, one of those leaders, Hope Smith, told her she misinterpreted the situation. Anderson was not fired or disciplined, as far as the young woman was aware, and continued to interact with young women in the organization until 2020, when he was charged with third-degree criminal sexual conduct over a claim that he anally penetrated his then-girlfriend despite her repeatedly telling him to stop. He is now facing trial. The Minneapolis woman said that, to her knowledge, Smith did not inform Young Life's headquarters in Colorado Springs, Colorado, of her claim; Smith is still the director for all Young Life activities in Minneapolis.

A representative for Young Life said there is "no evidence" that the allegations against Anderson were ever reported, adding that the organization has "immediately begun our process of researching this allegation and determining correct action." Smith and Anderson did not respond to multiple requests for comment. Anderson's attorney, Robert M. Paule, did not respond to multiple requests for comment on his client's behalf.

"They definitely get students at their most vulnerable moments," the Minneapolis woman said. "We actually need these kinds of mentors. And then to have the same mentors do things that cause trauma for the rest of our lives, that will never sit well with me."





A sculpture depicting children outside Young Life's corporate headquarters. Around 400,000 students in middle school, high school, and college attend Young Life meetings every week. Caleb Alvarado for Insider

Since 2000, at least eight Young Life volunteers or staff members have faced criminal charges alleging sexual misconduct with members of the ministry. One Young Life volunteer leader in Holland, Michigan, pleaded guilty to first-degree sexual misconduct after five men accused him of years of sexual abuse when they were teenagers; another 21-year-old staffer in California was sent to jail for one year after allegedly having sex with a 15-year-old girl in his Young Life group, which resulted in pregnancy. In at least three civil lawsuits filed against the group since 2003, plaintiffs alleged that Young Life neglected its duty to protect children from abuse.

Four women who spoke with Insider — Emily Welz, Laureana Arellano, Becca Wong, and one woman who asked to withhold her name — have filed charges with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission accusing Young Life of claims including sexual harassment. (The EEOC declined to comment on the ongoing investigations, noting that complaints made to the department were "strictly confidential.")

"Women are not safe in this ministry if Young Life is going to listen to our stories and do nothing about it," said Brie Boatman, a former staff member who left Young Life in 2018.

"The safety and well-being of children and youth is a top priority for our organization, and abuse is not tolerated," a representative for Young Life said in response to a detailed list of allegations provided by Insider.

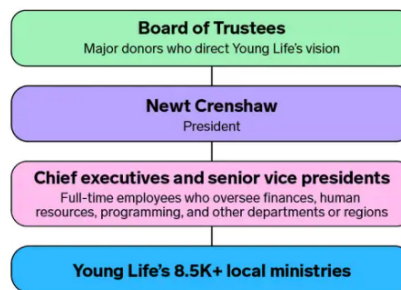
"Our sexual conduct, anti-harassment and mandatory reporting policies – along with training – are designed to equip Young Life staff and volunteers to recognize improper or criminal behavior and to take immediate and appropriate action. For this reason, along with the value we place on all those involved in our programs, we communicate clearly and consistently that Young Life is a mandatory reporter in all jurisdictions. We take every allegation of sexual misconduct and harassment seriously, and no one guilty of violating or abusing another individual is allowed to continue in relationship with Young Life."

'Go lead these children to the Lord, the more the better'

Founded in 1941 in a small Texas town, Young Life has grown in size and influence, counting Fleetwood Mac's Stevie Nicks and the Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers among its alumni. It operates in more than 100 countries, including France, Tanzania, and Mongolia. Its membership is made up of students in middle school, high school, and college; in 2019 almost 250,000 children visited one of its summer camps. Gov. Bill Haslam of Tennessee and Phyllis J. Washington, who is married to the billionaire industrialist Dennis Washington, sit on its board of trustees.

But while executives and trustees at Young Life's Colorado Springs headquarters may decide Young Life's policies, the ministry's volunteers are in charge of executing them. They visit school lunchrooms across the US, inviting students as young as 11 to Young Life's middle- or high-school ministries. Volunteer leaders are unpaid, but they do much of Young Life's frontline work with students, while staff members are more involved in programmatic and strategic work to grow the ministry.

Young Life organization chart



Source: Young Life internal documents and employees

INSIDER

Young Life's top level leaders are based in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Young Life internal documents and employees: Taylor Tyson/Insider

Taylor Farr, a former volunteer leader in Austin, Texas, remembered a college girl asking her to club her first day at a new high school. She was sitting alone at lunch.

Farr wasn't sure, but the leader insisted, offering her a ride. She agreed, and began attending meetings regularly. She soon opened up about how she came to move to Austin: She had left her mother's house in a low-income San Antonio neighborhood to live with her father, who had just been released from prison. "They told me Jesus could save me," Farr told Insider. "I moved to Austin for a reason, and that was to accept Christ."

Farr's introduction underscores Young Life's mission of meeting teens where they are. The focus is on bringing Jesus to them, not the other way around.

Putting young people in leadership roles is one reason Young Life has been so successful at recruiting, said Kate Ott, a professor at Drew University Theological School who studies Christian social ethics.

"The sense of belonging is an extremely strong marker of one's continued involvement in their faith community," Ott told Insider. Believing one is improving their community from the inside is a particularly effective tactic, Ott said.

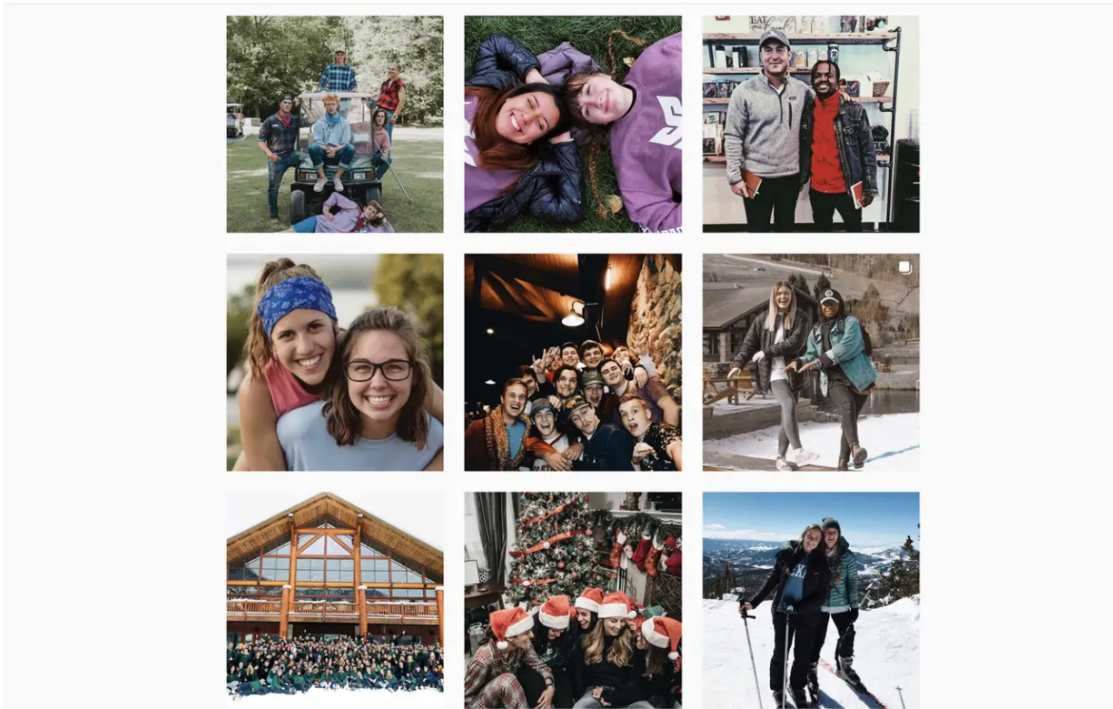
But the informal nature of the mentoring relationships that Young Life fosters can leave room for mixed messages and crossed boundaries.

In the mid-aughts, one area director in Colorado told a high school student that she needed a one-piece bathing suit for camp that summer. The man, who was in his 20s at the time, took her to Macy's and waited outside her dressing room as she tried several on.

"He made me try on every bathing suit and show it to him to see whether it was modest enough," she said. "That was super uncomfortable, looking back, and pretty messed up."

She said she told her regional director about the incident, which she now labels as sexual misconduct, in the week after. The regional director laughed it off, she said, calling him "really goofy."

Instagram



Some former members say Young Life markets itself online and in person as a ministry for "cool kids." Said one volunteer leader in Michigan, "On Monday nights, the popular kids go to Young Life, then McDonald's, then vape in the car after." [YL College and University/Instagram](#)

In the mid-2010s, a high-school student began weekly one-on-ones with a teacher who also volunteered with Young Life. She was, like the teacher, a volunteer leader at the organization. Though it was intended as a mentorship, the student viewed it very differently, she told Insider. (Insider is withholding some details about names, location, and dates to protect the woman's identity.)

"There was no structure," she said. "It felt like a date. He would vent to me. I was a high-school female, and he was an adult married male."

During these meetings, the teacher spoke about intimate details of his personal life, the former student said. When she told him about a friend who was 15 and had dated an adult man, the teacher told her that he disagreed with how age-of-consent laws are applied, according to screenshots of Facebook messages viewed by Insider. At the time, she was in high school and he was in his late 30s.

The teacher told Insider in an interview that he "steadfastly" denied the woman's claims that he discussed intimate details of his personal life with her. He provided screenshots of Facebook

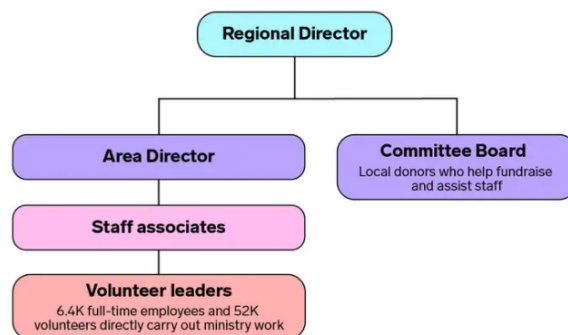
messages indicating that he felt their relationship was inappropriate, and that he wanted to end it. The young woman had previously stated she too wanted to end the relationship, though screenshots that the teacher shared showed that she continued to message him. "I cannot and should not serve in a mentoring role for you anymore," he wrote. "It's not working, and it's not healthy for you."

The two stopped speaking. She reported the man to her area director. She said the director told her she was equally to blame for the inappropriate relationship and, as far as she knows, did not investigate the claims made against the teacher.

A current Young Life area director based in the Pacific Northwest said he was not surprised by the area director's response.

He told Insider that Young Life has been a decades-long institution in some areas, and that those involved might want to protect it. "I would bet that there are people who want to protect the legacy of the institution try to handle it in a hush manner [rather] than really do justice," said the director, whose identity is known to Insider but who requested anonymity because he still works within the organization.

Young Life's local ministry organization chart



Source: Young Life internal documents and employees

INSIDER

Young Life has more than 8,500 local ministries. Young Life internal documents and employees; Taylor Tyson/Insider

Later that year, she reported the events to Young Life's Colorado headquarters. Those employees initially told her that the teacher had acted inappropriately, and that the group would investigate, she said.

Then, the national office asked her and the man to step down from their roles, pointing to a policy requiring volunteer leaders to temporarily relinquish their role if they're accused of sexual harassment — or if they leveled such accusations against others. (This practice is not mentioned in Young Life's sexual-health policy, which was viewed by Insider.)

The young woman fought to get back to volunteering; she had students to counsel about crushes, friend group issues, and family problems. The national organization eventually allowed her back as a volunteer, but she said they told her she was not allowed to ask what happened with the man or push for any punishment. Young Life removed the teacher from the organization, she said.

Insider viewed three written policies on Young Life's internal staff website outlining how to handle reports from children who report abuse, as well as a protocol for countering sexual harassment in the workplace.

But while three area directors said they received training in how to

report abuse, six volunteer leaders said they did not. Four former volunteers said they received abuse allegations from children while at Young Life and did not know how to handle them. One former volunteer leader in Texas said a 15-year-old girl told her she was dating a 20-year-old.

"I didn't know what to do," the former leader told Insider. "We weren't told what to do for anything like that. It was just, 'Go lead these children to the Lord, the more the better.'"

Summary

It is critical to Young Life's mission and ministry that Young Life staff and volunteers conform to the highest standards of sexual morality and conduct. In their work with Young Life and in their private lives, Young Life staff and volunteers shall not engage in any relationship or activity that constitutes sexual misconduct, including but not limited to the following:

1. Sexual relations or activities with any person outside of the marriage covenant.
2. Sexual relations or activities that constitute sexual offenses as defined by federal or state law (laws defining offenses under state law vary from state to state).
3. Relationships or activities that may not involve sexual contact (e.g., pornography, sexting, or romantic or sexually suggestive relationships with other Young Life leaders or kids) but are contrary to the theological and moral affirmations of Young Life's ministry.

Young Life's sexual conduct policy, viewed by Insider, groups together pornography and sexting with sexual relationships with minors and other sex crimes as activities banned by the organization. Young Life internal documents

Meanwhile, no one who spoke with Insider said they received training on how to report sexual misconduct between adults at the organization.

Emily Welz, a former Young Life area director in Indiana, said she used to be the "stereotypical Young Life person." But after she made an internal report alleging harassment to the national organization — she said another Young Life area director repeatedly touched her back, hair, legs, and hands in front of other employees — her stance changed. The man, who was cherished in the community, wasn't punished after her report, she said in an interview with Insider and in a 2021 written complaint to the EEOC. To avoid being caught alone, Welz said, she asked other women to accompany her to the bathroom or elevator when at conferences attended by her male coworker.



I did question that instinct — do I need to report this? But that felt really overwhelming.

Eventually, she left, and the family she developed over the past 17 years vanished. (Two women who say they witnessed several instances of unwanted touching corroborated Welz's account in interviews with Insider.)

Young Life said in a statement that it "received an internal complaint, investigated, and took action," but declined to comment further, citing an ongoing EEOC investigation.

One former Young Life employee who worked in the Pacific Northwest said that when she started volunteering at the organization seven years ago, she and her adult peers were verbally instructed not to spend one-on-one time with students of a different gender. But she didn't recall being told about what was appropriate among coworkers, or how to report unwanted attention; eight other Young Life volunteers reported the same training experience to Insider.

"All staff are trained to report misconduct to their supervisor," a representative for Young Life told Insider. "In the event the reporter is not comfortable doing reporting or needs additional help, Young Life provides multiple methods and support means for those

reporters – from one-on-one help and guidance from trained professionals, or via Young Life's anonymous reporting portal."

In 2017, a male area director in a nearby region began sending the Pacific Northwest employee messages on Instagram, she said in an interview with Insider and in a 2021 EEOC complaint. She believed the man, who is married, was trying to spark a friendship. But soon he started complimenting her body, which made her uncomfortable, she said.

She considered reporting him, but was worried she would face retaliation.

"Along the way, honestly, I did question that instinct — do I need to report this? But that felt really overwhelming," she told Insider, adding that women have historically been ignored when they report sexual misconduct. "So I just convinced myself that it was not inappropriate of him to speak to me that way. That felt easier." (A friend of the woman who previously worked at Young Life as a regional staff member corroborated her account in an interview with Insider.)

Over two years, the man's comments about her weight and appearance became more and more overt, she said. After he messaged her that he'd "hit that," she told her bosses. They offered to punish him in 2020 by denying him an annual raise and not letting him go to summer camp that year, she said. Simply wanting the harassment to end, she agreed.

But in 2021, she wanted to see if there was more that could be done, and she pushed Young Life's leaders to investigate the area director. They didn't take action, the woman said, and she resigned.

A representative for Young Life said the area director in question has since been terminated based "upon new information presented during the inquiry." The former area director declined to comment.

"I have also endured a very difficult year and a half since I reported the abuse I experienced and an excruciating 3 months since bringing the topic back up and being strung along and failed by leadership," she wrote in a resignation email reviewed by Insider.

Young Life's sexual-conduct policy prohibits employees and volunteers from reporting misconduct to the police without executive approval. "Any communication with the press or report to governmental agencies must be coordinated in advance with the vice president(s) of Human Resources or his or her designee and the vice president of Communications," its internal policy says.





Young Life has around 5,300 staff members and around 52,000 volunteer leaders. Caleb Alvarado for Insider

[Pamela Moore](#), a partner at McCarter & English who works with employers on worker-relations policies, said that portion of Young Life's policy would "generally be considered unlawful" under federal and state regulations, which give workers the right to report alleged violations of equal-employment laws to outside agencies. Employers are also required to tell employees they have those rights, Moore said.

Requiring employees to have an organization's executives vet any reports made to the police "is done simply to protect the organization and probably has the effect of discouraging people," said [Rick Rossein](#), a professor at the City University of New York School of Law. If Young Life were to punish employees who made a complaint to a governmental agency, Rossein said, that would be unlawful under federal employment law.

The representative for Young Life said that "all Young Life staff and volunteers are mandatory reporters. Additionally, Young Life has an anonymous portal to report any misconduct as well as a 24/7 hotline for staff to report an incident of any kind. If a report, made via either of these channels, is criminal in nature, Young Life contacts local authorities directly."

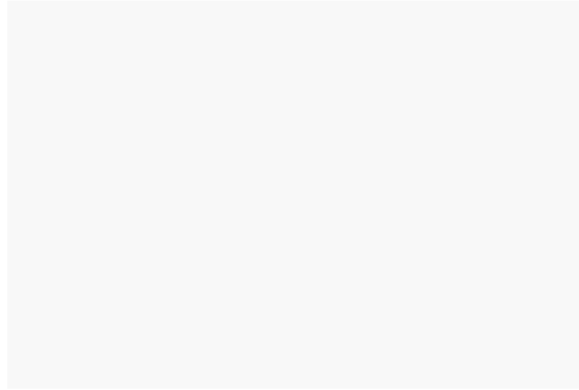
[Boz Tchividjian](#), an attorney who represents abuse victims in faith-based organizations, said a focus on public image can indicate a deeper problem. (Tchividjian declined to comment on Young Life's policies, noting he hadn't worked with the group directly.)

Generally, "they want to minimize abuse, but primarily it's not because they don't want kids not to be abused," said Tchividjian, who is also the grandson of the famed evangelist Billy Graham. "It's because of the impact that abuse could have on the organization." Faith-based organizations might have basic online training or policies on record, he added, but they fail to instill those ideas into the "DNA of the organization."

'You go to camp and your life is changed forever'

For members who thrive in Young Life's club activities, their next stop is often one of Young Life's 26 summer camps, 20 of which are based in the US. The camps are where members — who initially see Young Life as a casual, fun-filled social outlet heavy on games and light on the Bible — get the Christian hard sell. Campers sit through the "sin talk" and its enlightened counterpart, the "redemption talk," in which campers are meant to "stew in the reality of their sin" and then open their hearts to Jesus Christ. Their days are filled with mountain biking, water-slide rides, lattes from the camp coffee shop, and nightly cabin talks, where they confide in one another about problems and questions. One of the most repeated Young Life phrases is "Camp is the best week of your life."

"You go to camp and your life is changed forever," a former volunteer leader from Colorado told Insider. "You're kind of a disciple. You're tasked with bringing more kids to camp and spreading that word."



Young Life portrays itself as a fun, modern ministry on platforms like Instagram, as shown by the smiling faces here, but other former members said their experience didn't match up with the image the organization shows. [YL College and University/Instagram](#)

Like many Young Life members, Laureana Arellano started working at the summer camps after being active in Young Life in high school. But in the summer of 2019, she said, a fellow staffer at Young Life's Rocky Creek Ranch in Colorado assaulted, an allegation that also formed the basis of an EEOC complaint and a federal lawsuit. (The lawsuit was settled out of court.)

That summer, Arellano's complaint says, she was assigned a job in the kitchen, where another staffer named Cory Lange began pressing his body against her and grabbing her waist and buttocks. His behavior escalated, according to interviews and court documents reviewed by Insider, until he stuck his hands down Arellano's pants while she was making chicken and raspberry wraps for the campers, grabbing her genitals in front of more than a dozen kitchen staffers. She slapped his hand away and blurted out "What the fuck?" before running into the woods nearby.

In a declaration filed in connection with the case, Lange said he never touched Arellano in any sexual way or made any sexual advances toward her; he did not respond to Insider's request for comment. In written filings, Young Life denied Arellano's claim; a Young Life representative declined to comment on the case to Insider, citing the ongoing EEOC investigation, adding that the organization is "defending itself vigorously."

Arellano's complaint says she reported harassment by Lange to seven other staff members, including two supervisors. One, Christa Williams, told Arellano that Lange was being "friendly" and suggested that she tell Lange the touching made her uncomfortable, according to court records and deposition testimony. Another, Allen Hampton, advised Arellano that Lange was "a really good guy" who just wanted to get to know her, the complaint alleges. (Young Life denied these claims in its legal filings; Hampton and Williams did not respond to multiple requests for comment.)

Arellano says she eventually confronted Lange and told him the touching was unwanted; Lange said in court filings that she apologized to him for accusing him of unwanted touching. During a worship session that night, Arellano says, Lange hugged her in front of dozens of campers. (Williams said in a deposition that she witnessed the hug; in an interview, Arellano's roommate at the time corroborated her account of her interactions with Lange.)





Young Life's corporate headquarters in Colorado Springs, Colorado. "It's like a luxury vacation with all of your best friends," one former volunteer leader from Colorado said about Young Life camp. "You're all in this experience together. You go home and no one else has experienced that. It's so special." Caleb Alvarado for Insider

Arellano's experience that summer shook her so badly, she says, that she suffered anxiety attacks and bouts of vomiting before work. Still, she stayed in Young Life. The organization had supported her through lengthy hospitalizations for pancreatitis and other health issues, when she was in high school, she said.

"There are a lot of people within Young Life that were 'captured,'" she said, referring to members who found that Young Life was a crucial lifeline when struggling with difficult situations. Like her, Arellano said, these members often came from marginalized communities — Young Life boasts in brochures about its focus on "multicultural" children, and it offers an "urban week" in which non-white children are the sole campers — and struggle to break free of the group even as adults.

During her time at Young Life, Arellano said leaders tasked her with assessing the offensiveness of her peers' and superiors' comments about race, and encouraged her to exhibit "Latina spice," according to interviews and documents. Arellano said she did not see Lange harass other women at camp, all of whom were white.

Nearly eight months after Arellano's experience with Lange, she finally hit her breaking point. She attended "urban week" at a Young Life winter camp, where she said she saw two male campers grab a female camper's breasts. She reported this to the camp supervisor, who she said made the boys apologize to the girl but didn't kick them out.

The day after she returned home in February, Arellano reported her allegations both about Lange and about the attack at "urban week" to Young Life's national leadership. The organization assigned a regional director to investigate the claims and administer anti-harassment training, according to court records, but by the end of March 2020, the regional director told Arellano that she hadn't made any progress. Arellano left the organization.

'Until that day, I felt like a pretty normal kid'

Maddie Malvitz joined Young Life at the end of her freshman year at the University of Michigan. There were fun activities — grabbing pizza, bonfires, tubing down the Huron River. Malvitz, who didn't grow up in an especially religious family, said the group wasn't "in your face" about Christianity.

One of Malvitz's sorority sisters, Becca Wong, was also a member. A year older than Malvitz, Wong joined when she was a freshman and was quickly identified as having leadership potential.

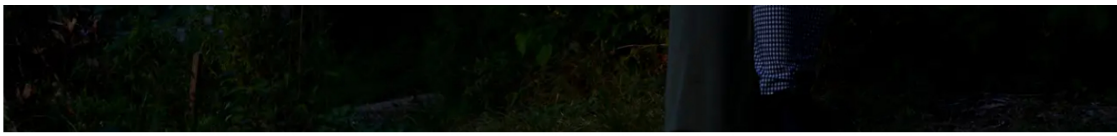
In August 2019, before the school semester started, Malvitz, Wong, and several other friends went to a block party. Also in attendance that night was a fellow Young Life student leader, who Wong and Malvitz say followed the group of women for much of the night.

Wong, who filed a complaint with the EEOC against Young Life in 2020, a copy of which was obtained by Insider, says the student leader pressed his body into hers while dancing and harassed her, prompting her to avoid him for the remainder of the night. Eventually, the student leader invited Malvitz to join him at a house where other Young Life members lived. Eager to meet more people in the organization and unaware of what Wong said had happened already, she said yes.

But Malvitz said the student leader took her to the back porch of a different house, where she said he stuck his hands down her pants and verbally pressured her to give him oral sex. Though she repeatedly said no, she felt pressured to eventually comply, she said. Afterward, she went to the house where several Young Life members lived, and she tried to sleep on the couch. The man's friends told the man to sleep upstairs; Malvitz said they could sense she was not doing well. She said the man came back to insist Malvitz have vaginal sex, which she said she refused to do. (The student leader did not respond to multiple requests for comment.)

The next day, Malvitz told her friend Megan Johnson her account of what had happened. "I could tell she was very off," Johnson, who corroborated the details of Malvitz's account, told Insider.





Maddie Malvitz, left, and Becca Wong, right, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Malvitz said Young Life encourages members to "tie up this idea that by being in Young Life and recruiting new members to Christ, they are doing the most important job." Sylvia Jarrus for Insider

Wong did not know about Malvitz's allegations at the time, but she did report an allegation that the male student leader had pressed his body into hers to her to LP Woodworth, the college director for Young Life in Washtenaw County, Michigan. Woodworth did not punish him, according to Wong's EEOC complaint. (Woodworth did not respond to multiple requests for comment.)

Malvitz went to a few Young Life club meetings after that night, but did not join the organization. She felt as if she was "faking it," she said, adding that the student leader ignored her.

"Until that day, I felt like a pretty normal kid my whole life," Malvitz said, adding that she's since "started having panic attacks or flashbacks." She said her grades slumped the following semester.

The following May, Malvitz told Wong, who was still a Young Life leader, that the student leader had assaulted her. Wong said she reported the allegation to local Young Life leaders several weeks after, withholding both parties' identities. Woodworth quickly guessed that the male student leader was the suspect, Wong said, and quietly removed him from Young Life.

But Young Life decided to kick Wong out as well; according to her EEOC complaint, her removal came because she refused to divulge Malvitz's identity. ("No one has lost their position at Young Life for reporting misconduct," a representative for the organization told Insider. "This would violate the non-retaliation section of our anti-harassment policy.")

Wong told the group's leaders that she was motivated by her experience reporting a sexual assault in high school that had been mishandled by administrators, according to an email Wong sent to Young Life in June 2020. She wanted to keep Malvitz's name out of the initial conversations, she wrote, to protect her. (In an interview with Insider, Wong's godmother, Caroline Chen, corroborated Wong's version of these events.)

"I was reacting out of fear because I felt like I was living through my own high school experience again," Wong wrote in response after local leadership removed her from the organization.

"Disrespect, trust and divisiveness are the main reasons for your removal," said the June 12, 2020 email, which Insider reviewed. It was signed by Young Life's senior area director for Washtenaw County. The email mentioned the sexual-assault accusation against one of its leaders but denied that Wong's reporting was the reason she was ousted.



I don't think that the harm that Young Life causes is justified by the Christians they produce.

The message about disrespect and divisiveness stood in contrast to the local leaders' previous demeanor toward Wong, which included asking her to babysit and inviting her to overseas trips and regional conferences, Wong said. "None of these issues were brought to my attention until after I [made the report], and then I was immediately terminated," she said.

terminated, she said.

Malvitz and Wong tracked down the CEO of Young Life and several other high-ranking national executives at the organization. Wong sent them an email, which was reviewed by Insider, explaining Malvitz's experience and her own termination.

There was no response. Neither woman has heard from Young Life since.

Citing the ongoing EEOC investigation, a Young Life representative declined to comment further, but noted it has "publicly denied all claims and is defending itself vigorously."

Wong, meanwhile, said her mentors and some of her closest friends had stopped speaking with her. They believe she's trying to stop spreading Christianity, she said.

"I don't think that the harm that Young Life causes is justified by the Christians they produce," Wong said. "You can't justify bringing youth to Christ when a percentage is sexually assaulted and left with no support system."



Boatman joined Young Life in high school, where she said the ministry was a "safe space." Zerb Mellish for Insider

During her junior year at Baylor University, Brie Boatman said one of her Young Life friends began to repeatedly cross the line. She said he made sexually explicit remarks to her about other women, and once instructed a middle-school boy to send her a Snapchat video of two Pop-Tarts rubbing against each other. The caption indicated it was Boatman and the friend "kissing in bed." A separate time, she said, he instructed a middle-school boy to show Boatman what they were doing during a car ride, and the boy mimicked masturbation over his clothing.

Boatman said she grew concerned and brought up his behavior with her fellow Young Life members. But "a lot of people said he was a great guy, and that he was maybe just kidding," Boatman said.

He came to her house one night while intoxicated, she said, and was acting so erratically that she had to physically remove him. After she visited him with her then-boyfriend, Dan, in an attempt to smooth things over, the man made a sexually explicit comment about the couple, punched a wall, and started throwing things, she said. (Dan, now Boatman's husband, and her friend Katie Schreiber corroborated her version of these events in interviews with Insider.)

Boatman reported the man to her local area directors in Waco, Texas shortly after.

The next month, her bosses came back to her: She would have to forgive her fellow member, because he "felt bad."

The area director sent her Bible verses on forgiveness, she said, and said Satan was trying to distract Boatman from spreading the word of Jesus. "It was up to me to let this happen," Boatman said. "They said, 'The ministry is doing well. This is all just to distract us from the mission.'"

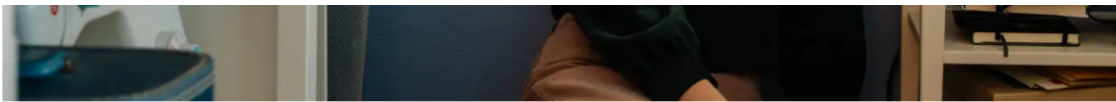
Boatman said she began to label the man's actions as sexual harassment, at which point her area director suspended her — and Dan, too. Under Young Life's policies, the two were barred from dating because they were both doing ministry work at the same middle school.

Boatman contacted Young Life's headquarters in Colorado. Two human-resources staffers flew down and investigated. They concluded that both Boatmans could rejoin the organization, and that the man who Boatman said harassed her would not be able to rejoin Young Life. Young Life confirmed the dismissal in a statement; the man did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Boatman, however, rejoined the organization for only one month. Even though the conclusion of Young Life's investigation was in her favor, she had soured on the organization.

"It's so ironic these people have relationships with Jesus, but they are really traumatizing people in a way that they may never trust Jesus," Boatman said.





Boatman left Young Life in 2018. "They invent this world that high schoolers and college students want to be part of but they're not taking the responsibility seriously," she said. Zerib Mellich for Insider

Young Life's structure — local chapters that are responsible for enforcing the policies of the national organization — may complicate the process of reporting misconduct.

The current Young Life area director based in the Pacific Northwest told Insider that he believed Young Life's national headquarters was competent to deal with sexual-harassment claims. The trouble, the area director said, is that much of that work is delegated to local organizations that don't take complaints seriously. "What I don't have confidence in is the local areas," the area director said.

But [Iris Halpern](#), the attorney involved with the EEOC complaints, argues that Young Life's national policy encourages inadequate local responses.

"The upper echelons in management at Young Life are not modeling conduct, behavior, or ideology that takes sexual harassment seriously, and that's why it's flourishing so much," Halpern said.

'The highest of highs and the lowest of lows'

In Michigan last summer, Becca Wong and Maddie Malvitz began looking for others like them. They came across the [#dobetteryounglife](#) movement, where former members, particularly LGBTQ ones, discussed how they were cast out from the group. (An internal policy states that LGBTQ youth are welcome in the ministry; LGBTQ adults, meanwhile, are not allowed to serve as volunteers or staff members, except for select cases in which they are "celibate.")



One Minnesota woman, Haeley Keilen, submitted her story to #dobetteryounglife. Keilen, who is gay, told Insider that she was not allowed to be a counselor at a Young Life camp for developmentally disabled children. One speculated reason, she said she heard through someone who talked to a leader at the camp, was that some feared Keilen would "take advantage" of the campers. (In response, Young Life's representative said that "decisions on fitness for a position at camp" were based on faith and conduct policies that explicitly bar LGBTQ members. The representative called Keilen's claims about fears she would take advantage of campers "double hearsay.")

Young Life "gave me the highest of highs and lowest of lows," said Keilen, adding that she'd struggled with her mental health since the organization forced her out of camp. "It had the best impact on me in the best way and the worst way."

Malvitz, who had initially looked to Young Life to deepen her faith, has grown only more alienated from it.

"They very much tie up this idea that by being in Young Life and recruiting new members to Christ, they are doing the most important job," Malvitz said. "I really think that culture is what creates the blind following. That allows them to get away with so much because they connect it all back to everything as if it's God's choice."

That summer, the Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin's murder of George Floyd sparked an international protest movement, prompting widespread conversations about racism, discrimination, and responsibility.

Women in Minnesota soon began speaking out online about other instances of wrongdoing in their community, and Joseph Anderson's name came up repeatedly in allegations; another Twitter user [surfaced](#) a pending 2020 criminal-sexual-conduct charge against Anderson.

For the young woman who said she found herself alone with Anderson on that snowy day in 2016, learning that others said they had experiences with Anderson forced her to reflect on what went wrong at Young Life, where she met some of her closest friends.

"Growing up in Northside, you don't have the best people to look up to," she said. "Some of the Young Life leaders serve as your family."

The organization helped keep her safe, providing food, social support, and professional advice. But it also harbored Anderson.

Others who left reminisced about mentors who encouraged them to reach their goals, silly games with their friends, and revealing conversations at summer camp. Some said they'd never found any community quite like it.

"With Young Life, I was a round peg in a round hole for 20 years," said a former college director, who said about half of her Young Life friends stopped talking to her when she left the organization. "The humor, fun, sharing your heart, all of those things. It was really hard to leave. I've never found anything like that once I stepped away from it."

But some have exploited this sense of community. Welz, the former area director in Indiana, alleged in an interview and in her EEOC complaint that the man who harassed her later told her boss that he kept touching her because he saw her like a daughter. For Young

kept touching her because he saw her like a daughter. For Young Life's membership, close relationships are the point — and those who have left the organization say the ministry refuses to punish the people who manipulate that system.

"People watched me deteriorate," Welz said. "Young Life knows who they're going to protect and not protect. You don't know it until you're not in that group."

Are you a current or former Young Life staff member, volunteer, or student? Share your story with reporter Rachel Premack [here](#) or securely [here](#).

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