

CASE FILES

The pattern made flesh — three self-appointed authorities, three different religions, one identical machine, and the court records to prove it

Forensic field guide · companion to the series

Prepared for Kristen Hall · June 2026

Why these three. A polygamist Mormon offshoot in Utah and Arizona. A non-Mormon Christian diet church in Tennessee. A counseling business in Utah. Three different religious worlds that never coordinated — running the identical exploit: a leader who claims a private line to God, makes themselves the necessary middleman to salvation, manufactures sin and fear, and leaves documented harm to children behind. This is the thesis in evidence: it is not one religion's problem. It is a method, and the method is portable.

Method. Each case is run through the same forensic checklist from “Hiding Behind God”: the unfalsifiable private channel to God, manufactured sin, installed fear, isolation, demanded submission, the money trail, and harm reframed as love. Every factual claim is drawn from court records and mainstream reporting, listed in the sources.

Contents

Case 1 — Warren Jeffs: The Prophet

Warren Jeffs led the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS), a polygamist breakaway sect based at Short Creek on the Utah–Arizona line. Critically, the FLDS is not affiliated with the mainstream Latter-day Saint church; it is a separate, fundamentalist offshoot. Run him through the checklist:

Private channel to God: his roughly 10,000 followers regarded him as the prophet who speaks for God on Earth — an unverifiable authority that made his word final.

Mediation monopoly: he made himself the sole person permitted to perform marriages, which let him control who married whom across the entire community.

Harm to children, the core of it: he used that power to arrange marriages of underage girls to older men, and took dozens of “spiritual wives” himself — by some accounts as many as eighty, at least two dozen of them minors. In 2011 a Texas jury convicted him of sexually assaulting two girls, aged twelve and fifteen, whom he had taken as “brides”; DNA proved he had fathered a child with the fifteen-year-old, and prosecutors played an audio recording of him assaulting the twelve-year-old.

Money and control: a later civil judgment found him liable for \$152 million to abuse survivors, in a case that also alleged forced labor and the seizure of followers' property.

The defense — religion as the shield: he represented himself, claimed religious persecution and “religious freedom,” and twice warned the court of punishment from God. He is serving life plus twenty years and is still treated as prophet by remaining followers.

The tell. Every element is here: an unfalsifiable claim to speak for God, used to seize total control over the most intimate parts of followers' lives, with the worst harm aimed at children — and “religious freedom” invoked as the cover. The faith was the costume; the crime was the point.

Case 2 — Gwen Shamblin Lara: The Wellness Prophet

This is the case most worth studying, because it wears no traditional religious uniform at all — it arrives as weight loss. Gwen Shamblin Lara, a registered dietitian, founded the Weigh Down Workshop in 1986 (a faith-based program built on praying yourself thin) and grew it into a vast ministry, then founded the Remnant Fellowship Church in Brentwood, Tennessee in 1999. She was not Mormon and not in Utah — which is exactly why she belongs here.

Private channel to God: former members and HBO's docuseries describe her positioning herself as the voice and prophet of God, under whose authority everything fell. One former member put the trap precisely: who were they to question what God was telling her?

Manufactured insufficiency: the program fused evangelical fundamentalism with body control — your weight became a measure of your standing with God, an endlessly renewable source of not-enough.

Installed fear and isolation of help: the church reportedly demanded that followers not take psychiatric medication for mental illness, cutting members off from outside care.

Documented harm: former members recount brainwashing, eating disorders, depression, and suicidal ideation. The church's child-discipline teachings — including corporal punishment and confining children — drew investigation after the abuse death of eight-year-old Josef Smith, the son of two Remnant members. His parents were convicted in 2007 of child abuse and murder, and Shamblin and church members publicly supported and helped fund their legal defense.

Money: she was widely criticized for lavish personal spending drawn from ministry proceeds. She died in a 2021 plane crash along with her husband and five church leaders.

Why she matters most. Strip the steeple entirely and the machine still runs. “You need me to be thin, to be right with God” is the identical move as “you need me to be saved” — a self-appointed prophet, a manufactured deficit, fear, isolation from outside help, and harm to a child. The wellness costume is the newest disguise, and the most disarming, because it doesn't look like religion at all.

Case 3 — Franke and Hildebrandt: The Counselors

The Utah case from the earlier brief completes the set. Ruby Franke ran a parenting channel; Jodi Hildebrandt ran a counseling business, ConneXions; the two coached parents on raising children in “truth.” Both pleaded guilty to four counts each of second-degree aggravated child abuse and were sentenced in 2024 to four-to-thirty years.

Private channel: prosecutors stated that Hildebrandt regularly claimed God communicated directly with her and gave her directions, and that Franke accepted her as leader.

Manufactured sin and fear: the children were cast as sinful and “possessed,” and abuse was reframed as teaching them to repent and as driving out evil spirits.

Isolation and harm: Hildebrandt pushed Franke to cut off family and finally her husband and children; the documented abuse included restraint, denial of food and water, and forced labor, framed to the children as discipline they deserved.

The fairness point that proves the thesis. Reporting noted the women's beliefs in key respects departed from mainstream Latter-day Saint doctrine. As with Jeffs and the FLDS, this is not an indictment of a faith — it is individuals weaponizing religious authority. That is the whole argument: the denomination is interchangeable; the method is constant.

What All Three Share

Lay the files side by side and the same skeleton shows through every one of them:

- **A self-appointed line to God.** Each leader claimed a private, unverifiable channel — prophet, voice of God, direct instruction — that conveniently made their word unchallengeable.
- **The necessary-middleman pitch.** You need me — to be saved, to be thin, to be righteous. Salvation, worth, and safety were all routed through the leader.

- **Manufactured sin and installed fear.** Followers (and their children) were defined as fallen, impure, or possessed, then offered the leader's program as the only cure.
- **Harm aimed at children.** In all three, the gravest documented damage fell on kids — the people least able to refuse and most dependent on the adults running the system.
- **Religion as the shield.** “Religious freedom,” “God's authority,” “raising them in truth” — the sacred language was the cover that delayed accountability.

The verdict. Three religions, three eras of disguise — old-world polygamist prophet, modern wellness guru, contemporary parenting counselor — and one machine underneath. You were right: it is not about which religion. It is about the method, and the method has a body count. Name the operators one by one, as the courts did. There is no master above them to find — only the same exploit, rediscovered again and again by people who wanted what controlling others gets them.

Sources

Court records and mainstream reporting. Verify specifics against the originals where precision matters.

Warren Jeffs / FLDS

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Gwen Shamblin Lara / Remnant Fellowship

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ChurchLeaders — “under God's authority,” prophet claims: <https://churchleaders.com/news/408258-gwen-shamblin-lara-cult-hbo.html>

NewsChannel 5 — investigations, no-psychiatric-medication, child discipline:
<https://www.newschannel5.com/news/newschannel-5-investigates/before-hbo-max-explore-newschannel-5s-gwen-shamblin-remnant-fellowship-investigations>

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Franke / Hildebrandt

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Axios — beliefs departed from mainstream LDS: <https://www.axios.com/local/salt-lake-city/2024/03/25/ruby-franke-jodi-hildebrandt-religious-extremism-child-abuse>

Companion to “The Architecture of Spiritual Control,” “Ascension, Inc.,” “Hiding Behind God,” and “The Gate Was Never Locked.” Compiled from court records and mainstream reporting, June 2026. These cases concern documented child abuse; details are kept factual and non-graphic.