

Talks

Intro

Thanks for the opportunity to talk about Gloriavale. I am sure you going to find the information you hear tonight eye opening, fascinating, at times confronting, but we also trust that you hear the message of hope.

I'm Liz Gregory, General Manager of the Trust. This newly created Trust has arisen out of a necessity and a desire to better serve the people who leave Gloriavale – whether they leave by choice or excommunication. I'll give a brief presentation of

Warning, this evening's talks include religious material. It's impossible to understand Gloriavale, without understanding some of the beliefs that underpin the place, and we'll unpack some of these as the evening progresses.

I'll hand over to Hannah Harrison (previously Ben Canaan), who lived in Gloriavale until she left with her family almost 5 years ago for a brief overview.

History of Gloriavale: (7 mins)

The **Gloriavale Christian Community** is an isolated religious group based on the West Coast 80km from Greymouth. There are currently over 600 people living there, many who were born there and have never known life on the outside.

The group was founded in 1969 by my great grandfather Neville Cooper (later renamed "Hopeful Christian"). Hopeful was an [Australian](#)-born preacher who came to New Zealand. He had spent 20 years running evangelistic tent meetings in Australia, but all attempts to start a community over there had failed. He remained as a main leader until his death last year at age 92.

He had a dream that the Bible should be lived out practically and that the principles of sharing and holding all things in common were important. He arrived in NZ in the late 1960's and by 1969 a group split away from a local church under the leadership of Hopeful to begin Springbank Christian Community near [Christchurch](#). They would often be seen in the Cathedral Square trying to recruit new members. New members moved onto the property and started to share their worldly goods and hold a common financial purse. All incomes were put into the kitty and distributed out equally according to the size of the family. Over time they grew too big for this property, and just as I was born in 1994 the community completed the shift over to the West Coast where they purchased a farm, and set about developing it.

The community has had various business interests over the years including dairying, charter flights, moss picking, , Honey production, Meal plant for pet food, deer farms and hunting ventures and more.

The community runs a school and 4 daycare centres for the many children. The education is mainly aimed at those studies which will help the community life (trades for men, and a more basic education for the women). The women spend their lives involved in more traditional domestic roles or childcare. Some women will do distance learning to get their Early Childhood Training, and some men will do Trade Courses in Greymouth, but no one is allowed to just study what they want.

Regarding money, the community members do not receive any money of their own to spend, and many do not know that they actually receive incomes and pay taxes. They are technically all registered as self-employed, but when they were younger they signed over control of their bank accounts and Inland Revenue access to Gloriavale. Working for Families Tax credits as well as income is deposited in their account, and the transferred out as the community sees fit – into operational costs of housing and feeding them, any donation to their overseas ministry work in India, and Africa, and then the rest is a donation to the Charitable Trust. The Government then kindly thanks the people for giving to a charity and they receive back 33% as a tax credit.

All mealtimes are communal, and the community runs on a strict timetable where no one gets much free-time. Everyone lives in hostels, which are set up with a large circulation space in the middle and family bedrooms all coming off this area. The bathroom facilities are shared with others on your hostel floor.

Gloriavale is well known for its trademark long blue dresses for the women, which must be worn regardless of the activity or the temperature! They do make an exception on your wedding day where you can choose to wear a pink one.

These days, marriages are usually arranged by the leaders and the couples are very young. (I was 20 when we left and I told my Dad that I did NOT want to marry anyone in there!). It's not uncommon for families to have more than ten children as you are not allowed to practise birth control. I come from a family of 15 children.

The community runs an amazing concert every 2 years as their way of spreading the word about their way of life. Concert season goes on for 6 weeks, and they hold up to 6 concerts a week. The concert includes a 3-course meal, and quality performances. There is a lot of talent at Gloriavale, with exceptional artists, costume & set designers, musicians, comedians and more. You can request an invitation to go to the concert, but I suggest you don't say you're related to anyone who has left, and certainly don't admit you're from Timaru!

The community itself is run by a group of Servants and Shepherds who oversee the practical and spiritual running of Gloriavale. We call this group the "SS".

Hopeful put in place a successor before he died, and the community are still adjusting.

I know that some of the TV documentaries show that life at Gloriavale looks really idyllic and pleasant, but unfortunately, there is no carefree life there. The teaching is more about suffering and enduring, and giving up things to reach perfection.

Over the years, the community has got stricter and stricter, as they felt the world was encroaching on them. They despise vanity, competition and any disobedience. This has led to the really strict dress code, and a myriad of rules and regulations that need to be followed.

Cellphones are banned, men must have their top button done up and you can't roll up your sleeves. Hands must not be in pockets. There is a whole handbook of appropriate stitches and patterns for people who want to knit garments and you are not permitted to come up with your own creative versions. It goes so far as to say how many different colours you can use on the garment. Stripes were banned. (Read the collar part shown on the screen. *"Rib is the only type of stitch we will use for collars. Anyone may have a collar on general knitting for warmth. However, we won't knit collars for meeting garments for 4 year olds and up. We won't have the roll collars at all. Collars do not need to be so long that they sit right out to the shoulder. (1/2" from shoulder).*

If you don't like the rules, then your only option is to keep quiet, or leave the community – and risk losing your soul. Most people just keep quiet.

Gloriavale leaders are like all thought-control group leaders, and they demand full obedience and submission to them. If you are suspected of being disloyal, you will be brought before them, a circle of men will form around you and you'll be preached at until you break. This use of manipulation and coercion is common in oppressive regimes. Your salvation and the threat of excommunication and hell is regularly held over your head.

At the age of 18 you had to sign a Commitment Vow promising to live forever at Gloriavale in obedience to the Bible and the leaders, to the detriment of our souls if we should break it. Gloriavale have recently revised the Commitment Vow, making the statements regarding obedience to the leaders even stronger. They are currently trying to push this through, but there is some discontent. However, the majority of people will end up signing it. They simply lose too much if they refuse.

If you've ever wondered why people don't just "leave" Gloriavale if they don't like it, then pay attention to the vow they make.

I believe that the overseeing shepherd and the shepherds of our Christian Church Communities are called and ordained of God and that He holds them in His hand. I willingly submit myself to them in love and faith in every area of my Christian faith and practical life, as they live and teach according to the Word of God, trusting in my heart that God will work out His will overall as I do so. I will neither hold nor teach any doctrine or belief contrary to what they teach. I submit myself likewise in love and faith to all others in authority in this Church and to my brothers and sisters in Christ, esteeming others better than myself.

I make all these vows and declarations voluntarily from my heart before this Church today, and regardless of whether I abound or am abased, or live in peace, persecution, or affliction, they bind me for the rest of my life; not only legally and morally before men, but also spiritually before God in heaven, so that if ever I break any of them, I do so to the peril of my soul.

This is one powerful reason why people remain in Gloriavale, even after they realise there is a lot wrong with the place. There is simply too much to lose by leaving.

There are many recent cases of men who have been excommunicated, whose wives and children are still inside. We will hear from one of those cases this evening. Most wives say they are staying there because they are too fearful to leave for fear of sending themselves and their children to hell, and being separated from their parents and family is unimaginable. They are also taught that they couldn't survive on the outside if they did choose to leave.

The outcome of these beliefs is a regime run by fear. And for the majority of people inside Gloriavale, it's all they have ever known.

The community has poor cell-phone reception and there is only internet for those who are working in an industry which requires it (and this is extremely limited). This means it's hard for the people inside to have any knowledge of what's happening in the outside world, and very difficult for them to even plan to leave. Where would you go and who would help you?

However, people do still manage to leave and if you ask the right questions tonight, you'll find out how.

I'll pass over to Liz now for some information on the Trust

Thanks Hannah, I know people will be looking forward to asking you questions at the end.

How did we get involved with GV Leavers? (2 mins)

I often get asked if I lived in Gloriavale, and the answer is No! But we did visit for a weekend a few years ago. We are not welcome any more!

A group of us got involved with leavers about 6 years ago when a young fellow and a small family who recently left GV visited our church one Sunday. Bronwyn and Rene realised they needed love and care took them under their wings. From

there it just escalated, and more church members got on board. This family's sister then arrived, followed by large families of up to 14, singles, and smaller family units. All up nearly 150 people have left over the past 6 years and over half have permanently established themselves in the South Canterbury region. There are quite a few families here in Canterbury, many of who moved here 10 – 30 years ago. However, two families have come to the region in the past few months. Most of the people who have left come out with little more than the clothes they are wearing, possibly some bedding and little-to-no money.

In the past 6 years my husband and I have taken 6 families into our home (for 4-5 weeks at a time) and have helped them settle into the outside world! We have, with help from lots of others and our supportive church community, clothed families and furnished houses. We don't collect items in advance anymore, because of the practicalities of storage, but when a family leaves Gloriavale we do become the local drop-off point! At the moment we don't need any more clothes or furniture for the recent arrivals, but we thank you for the kindness offered so far. The families are extremely grateful. Join our Facebook Page to keep up with any items we might require.

We have learnt a lot over the years and we value the friendship we all have with many leavers. Us and our church family have spent years socialising with them, enjoying milestones, sharing meals, holidays, playing games and talking about the big questions of life.

Many of the leavers that have left over the past few years have done so because of amazing mission work from people on both sides of the island. A concerted effort has been made to connect with those inside Gloriavale via various methods. We admire the people who are involved in that work.

The formation of the Trust has been a natural outcome of years of friendship and volunteer ministry work and we're excited to see more alliances form between agencies and Govt departments, who need to be more aware of what the leavers are saying.

Firstly, why start up a Trust to help Gloriavale Leavers? (4 mins)

First up, we care! Gloriavale attempts to run on the principals of the Bible and there are many sincere people in there who believe Gloriavale has the truth and believe they are serving God in the best way they can. However, it has been technically and correctly labelled a religious sect and a social cult as it has all the features of a thought-control group. There are many other groups which also practice these coercive behaviours, but Gloriavale is at the extreme end. They

practice shunning, lack of access to information, manipulation of thought, controlling leaders, punishment if you challenge authority, fear of the outside, spiritual abuse and more.

All people who leave are quick to say that it's a system run by fear from a group of leaders who exert absolute authority over every aspect of your life. And I mean every aspect. Members are fearful to express any minor opinion which is contrary to the leaders. The leaders interpret scripture for you, and you submit to that. If not, then you are either forced to leave, or you choose to leave. We have genuine concerns for the wellbeing of those who leave. We also have a lot of concerns around lack of access to health & mental health services, educational opportunities, human rights abuses and a generally unhealthy culture of coercive management dominance.

Over the years of listening to Leavers, they all tell a very similar story of life inside GV. They are talking about living in a regime akin to communism. They talk constantly about being threatened with spiritual death if they leave, and many have told us that they were told that they would be killed in an accident, or die from an illness if they leave Gloriavale, as they would be under the judgement of God. This kind of threat makes it difficult to adjust out here.

The leavers also often leave like refugees, with few belongings and identify documents, with the knowledge that contact with family will be difficult from now on and you're not likely to go back again anytime soon.

Add on top of that the naivety which comes from being isolated and not having a wide range of life experiences, an inability to know who to trust and believe in case you get deceived, and then top it off with the inexperience the Leavers have in making decisions for themselves and their family, and you can see things are starting to get very complex and difficult. It can be very overwhelming. With support, this difficult time can be made a little easier.

You can leave a place like Gloriavale and be physically set up in a few short months. But the emotional stuff takes many more years to work through. It's not uncommon for people who have come out of super cults like Gloriavale to take 5-8 years to readjust. Think about all the things you need to learn, and un-learn.

So as you can see there are many more layers of complexity in there – including things like brainwashing and spiritual, emotional, & physical abuse.

On many levels, we find it helpful to remember that Gloriavale leavers are their own individual people, with their own personalities. They don't like to be known

only as a Gloriavale Leaver. Some are even keen to distance themselves from what they consider an embarrassing past. Whichever way you look at it, there is no denying that they have come from a totally different culture – even if they don't necessarily realise it yet! Sometimes these cultural worlds collide, so we like to walk beside them, helping them to understand the way we do things out here.

Leavers face many hurdles and we can't think of too many other groups in NZ who experience this extent of social change in a short period of time. That's why we believe GV Leavers need people around them to guide them, love them, and support them.

On a more practical level, we've started this Trust because the cost of settling one family is upwards of \$50,000. You think about everything you've ever owned being burnt to the ground tomorrow, and think of the cost of starting up again. Being a registered charity has given us the opportunity to apply for funding grants from other groups, organisations & individuals. We're grateful to the Community Trust of Mid & South Canterbury who last October gave us \$10,000 to help families in the South Canterbury region. The timing was perfect, as 2 large families arrived in the region within a few short weeks! We have also received some small amounts of funding from the NZ Charitable Foundation and the AD Hally Trust, along with other local groups. We are grateful!

A lot of furniture, clothing & toys gets kindly donated by the local community and churches, but we still find there is still a shortfall of cash between \$5,000 - \$10,000 per family. We need this for bond and rent payments, insurance, petrol, personal items and more. The list is a long one! Our Trust also has operational costs and wages. We have a legal fund, a research fund and more! Tonight we are going to give you a chance to partner with us.

Finally, we started this trust because we know the leavers appreciate our help. We canvassed a range of leavers when we were considering starting the Trust, to see how they would feel about it, and one young lady was moved to tears and she said, "You're doing what we would all love to do, but we can't".

That's why we've started this Trust. There is an identifiable need right here at our doorstep.

What does the Trust aim to do? (4 mins)

As stated in our Trust Deed the Trust Purposes are:

TRUST PURPOSES

The purposes and aims of the Trust are to support people who have left the Gloriavale Christian Community, to enable them to become independent and to integrate into local communities. This will involve support in practical, financial, spiritual, emotional and educational matters.

In addition to the obvious things this entails, we also have other aims and goals.

- a) We are going to create resources to help leavers and those who help
- b) We want to develop a website that leavers and supporters can access for resources to help them. We'll have contact information, agencies that can help, articles of interest etc. We will get the message inside GV about this (for those who have access to the web). We applied for some funding for this project recently but were declined on the basis that it was an IT project. If you're interested in contributing to this cost, feel free to make contact! We have the designer and the website builder and the plans all ready to go. This is going to be a powerful tool for those inside Gloriavale who do have access to the internet, giving them confidence to leave.
- c) We hope to launch a fun children's book this year about kiwi culture. The text is almost complete and it will be a great fundraiser for the Trust.
- d) We've created a Friends of the Trust email group. We invite you to join the email list tonight, especially if you want to partner with us or keep updated on major developments. We take people's privacy seriously and so we won't be sharing specific details of leavers. You can see the information in the pledge brochure.
- e) Most exciting is the research project we intend to undertake. It's time for a recent thorough investigation into life inside Gloriavale as told by leavers. Think of it like a snapshot in time. This will involve interviewing all leavers over the past 10 years to build up a picture.
- f) Work with leavers and lawyers to give the Govt Ministers, Police and Charity Services the information they require to continue investigations. They want and need data.

So, there you have it! Lofty goals and ideas and not enough time in the day to implement it all! How will we achieve it all? I've been employed as a support

worker, Fundraise, Apply for grants, Use existing connections and make new ones.