

WHEN YOUR FRIENDS FALL OFF THE EDGE OF THE EARTH

Conspiracy theorists can fall into vicious cycle of alienation and acceptance, pulling them away from society at large and further into the circle of believers.

By Kelly Weill

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Something was wrong, and Nate Wolfe had a pretty good idea what. He wasn't scheduled to preach that day, but early on a Friday morning, he told me, he received a text summoning him to church. In one hour, please.

More than seven years earlier, Wolfe had moved his whole family cross-country for the job as a minister in the suburbs of Toledo, Ohio. Since then the insular parish community had become his world—his “fishbowl,” he described it. But in a matter of minutes that Friday morning, he told me, Church elders fired him; Wolfe became a fish out of water.

“They didn’t want any discussion,” he told me. “They just slid a piece of paper across the table to me and said, ‘We can’t have a member with this kind of association.’” (The Church did not respond to multiple requests for comment.)

Wolfe believes that association was his “flat Earth” belief, which he’d kept under wraps in order to avoid this kind of situation. The deeply unpopular theory erroneously posits that the planet is flat as a pancake and (according to many) contained beneath a dome. Still, certain Christians, like Wolfe, preach that the idea is supported by a literal interpretation of the Bible.

Wolfe had been full-on “flat,” as believers refer to themselves, for almost a year, ever since he stumbled across YouTube videos promoting a biblical flat-Earth model when researching a sermon on the Great Flood. By 2018 he’d decided to attend Take On the World, a

Christian conference promoting flat-Earth theory, about an hour from his home. Wolfe left the convention with a new group of friends and a new commitment to live publicly as a flat-Earther. He had planned to broach the topic delicately during an upcoming Church-leadership meeting, making a religious argument for the theory beginning with Genesis 1, but he never had a chance. He believes the leaders discovered his belief when they learned he'd attended the conference.

It's not hard to see how a pastor giving an unexpected flat-Earth sermon could harm a congregation. The polarizing idea has a way of setting people at odds with one another and drawing them into other fringe conspiracy theories—no good for a house of worship. But often, as in Wolfe's case, flat-Earthers are the biggest victims of their convictions.

Wolfe's sudden firing, he told me, was "traumatic." His kids had grown up in this community. The Church was filled with his closest friends. Still, almost no one reached out after he was fired. "It was just like, all of a sudden, we didn't exist."

Indeed, almost universal in the flat-Earth community is the experience of ridicule and social rejection. Acquaintances unfriend adherents on Facebook, and in real life, after seeing one too many posts calling NASA a satanic psyop. Employers question their sanity. Family

members find somewhere else to spend Thanksgiving. The loss foregrounds practically every conversation at flat-Earth meetups, so common that some describe themselves with the language of persecuted minorities: Announcing one's belief is referred to as "coming out," a term most commonly associated with the LGBTQ community. Separated from loved ones, many then find themselves trapped inside the theory with the only other people who will believe them.

On both mornings of the 2018 Flat Earth International Conference, the emcee Rick Hummer asked audience members to yell out insults they'd heard since coming out as flat. The responses I heard while attending the event sounded like a collective scream of catharsis. "Crazy," came one popular cry. "Retard," someone shouted. "Flat-tard!"

Cindy Gruender, a Colorado woman, didn't need to yell. She wore a Miss Flat Earth sash across her chest, like a pageant queen. She was reclaiming the title after it was given to her as an insult at a Church that she later quit, she told Colorado Community Media.

Many flat-Earthers wear rejection as a badge of honor, although not all do it as literally as Gruender. In one YouTube video, an upbeat girl who appears to be in her early teens performs joking skits about the ostracization some families faced after going flat. One sequence

shows the family “nicely, but not so nicely, being ousted from the Church,” as a young boy in a pastor’s outfit tapes a sign banning flat-Earthers to the door. “But at the end of the day, you always have Jesus, the online flat-Earth community, and your family,” the girl says. “Unless your family has disowned you. Then you just have Jesus and the online flat-Earth community.”

Sadly, the girl was probably correct. Flat-Earth and other conspiracy theories are community affairs, driven by a push and pull of simultaneous rejection from mainstream society and affirmation by a small cohort of fellow believers. By definition, conspiracy theories imply a coordinated plot by a hostile group. But many of the most successful ones suggest the existence of another group: victims. The more a person identifies with a persecuted in-group, the more likely they are to suspect evil deeds by a threatening out-group, researchers at the University of Kent and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam noted in a [2018 paper](#). In a [2015 study](#), for example, Indonesian students were more likely to buy into conspiracy theories about Western countries catalyzing terror attacks if researchers first emphasized the students’ Muslim faith and described those nations as an anti-Muslim threat. Similarly, in the 1980s, the Soviet Union’s KGB spread rumors throughout the United States that government scientists had engineered the HIV virus to wipe out the country’s Black and gay

populations. Although the rumors were false, the theory took off with some Black Americans who remembered the country's history of medical abuse against Black people.

In their book *American Conspiracy Theories*, which compiles decades of data across a range of conspiracy theories, the researchers Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent found a trend of conspiracist thinking among the disenfranchised (minorities, the poor, and people without a high-school degree) and among groups fearful of losing status. (The specific demographic breakdown of flat-Earthers is hard to come by.) “Conspiracy theories are essentially alarm systems and coping mechanisms to help deal with threats,” the two write. “They tend to resonate when groups are suffering from loss, weakness, or disunity.”

But joining a conspiracy movement is only a short-term hack for feeling safer. Once committed to the theory, people often find themselves even likelier to be socially ostracized. This can lead to a vicious cycle of alienation and acceptance, pulling a person away from society at large and further into the circle of believers. Indeed, the Kent and Amsterdam researchers noted that conspiracy theorists come to expect exclusion and learn to brace themselves for backlash.

Nate Wolfe, the former Ohio pastor, told me he hadn't met "a single flat-Earther that hasn't lost someone." "There are some that have been completely disowned from their family. There are some whose best friends of 20, 30 years, 40 years won't even talk to them," he said.

For Robert Foertsch, a flat-Earth believer, this has made the holidays more difficult. "There's family tension. They're all excited about living on the globe, and I say I know that's a lie," he told an interviewer in 2019.

This type of alienation extends to other conspiracist groups, such as the QAnon community, the delirious right-wing movement that accuses former President Donald Trump's foes of occult horrors. Given some adherents' baffling insistence that Hillary Clinton has actually eaten children, QAnon can understandably put some believers at odds with family members, who are often bewildered by their loved ones' convictions. "She's isolated herself," the son of one QAnon adherent told *HuffPost*. He'd distanced himself from his mother after shouting matches over her beliefs, among which was a theory that preached that Clinton had ripped off and worn a child's face. "She has no relationship with me or my kids." A Reddit board for people who have lost friends or family to the theory, called "QAnonCasualties," had more than 232,000 members as of publication. "Brainwashing our

kids,” read the subject line of one post, in which a mother alleged that her husband had begun inundating their young kids with both flat-Earth arguments and QAnon theories about child trafficking. “This is not the man I married,” she wrote.

Facing similar ostracization, many flat-Earthers find that online acquaintances are the closest ties they have. “A lot of them will just pull down the blinds and be like, ‘All I need is me, myself, and I, and my friends on the internet,’” Wolfe said.

It’s a disconnected way to live. Before believers started organizing meetups, the Flat Earth International Conference founder Robbie Davidson told me, the movement looked like “just some kooky, crazy conspiracy people online.” Adherents would host video hangouts, but the kinship they craved was fragmented by screens and laggy Skype connections. When “you sit down with someone, look them in the eyes, and see their mannerisms, it becomes real,” Davidson said.

Meetups, some of which sell individual tickets for hundreds of dollars, are crucial to the movement. “I always encourage people: Go to a meetup, even if you have to drive two, three hours,” Wolfe told me. It’s a plea I’ve heard across years of flat-Earth conferences.

“Especially if you have family who ridicule you,” Rick Hummer said during the 2018 FEIC conference, attendees should think of the event “as a big family reunion.”

Two women in the crowd at that event had traveled from Northern California, where their homes were in the heart of a raging wildfire. One showed me pictures that a first responder had just snapped of her neighborhood, which was reduced to ash. The other was waiting to learn whether her home was still standing. Her mother, who lived in an area evacuated because of the fires, was missing. She felt “a little guilty” coming to the FEIC as her world burned, she told me, but the flat-Earth family she met at the conference was helping her keep her mind off things.

But soon the two-day conference would end, and the pair would return to what remained of their homes, and to the families and friendships they had already feared losing to flat Earth. One of the women approached the microphone during a question-and-answer session with celebrities of the flat-Earth movement. Already that day, I had heard conference attendees discuss a conspiracy theory about the wildfires, suggesting that they were the result of government ray guns. Her question, however, had nothing to do with forest-fire plots, or

even the specifics of flat-Earth theory. She wanted to know how she could “come out” as a flat-Earther on Facebook without losing friends.

When I discuss the flat-Earth movement with outsiders, many express dismay that the adherents act as if they’re living on a different planet than the rest of us. They want to know what can snap conspiracists back into our shared reality. But for many flat-Earthers, their belief endures because of the community. Flat Earth is their family, the circle of friends who stand by them. It’s the rest of the planet, they think, flat or otherwise, that has left them and their movement behind.

This article was adapted from Kelly Weill’s recent book, Off the Edge: Flat Earthers, Conspiracy Culture, and Why People Will Believe Anything.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2022/02/flat-earther-social-isolation/622908/>