Testimony from a young Laestadian
FECRIS Conference, 21 May 2016, Sofia, Bulgaria

Hi everyone.

First off, I want to apologize for my relatively weak English.
I'm a 17-year-old female high school student in Finland. When it comes to religion, I'd say that out of all the young Finnish people most are atheists (myself included).

However, I was born to a very strict and raging religion called Conservative Laestadianism. It is a Lutheran revival movement and the most successful Laestadian movement. There are about 155.000 Conservative Laestadians, and most of them live in Finland, Sweden and USA.

I was brought up and brainwashed in a very close-minded community. It seemed to almost intentionally try to keep me separated from the other (normal) kids. I was taught that only Conservative Laestadianism can sell you the ticket to heaven. However, the prize isn't exactly the lowest:

– Premarital sex is a sin.
– Contraception is a sin.
– Homosexuality is a sin.
– Wearing any makeup is a sin (as well as coloring your nails).
– Having piercings and/or tattoos is a sin.
– Dyeing your hair is a sin.
– Any music from the last century is horrifyingly sinful.
– Being a professional athlete/actor is a sin.
– Going to the cinema is a sin.
– Having a TV is a sin.
– Alcohol, drugs, gambling and swearing are sins.
– Being a female priest/preacher is a sin.
– Movies and kissing are frowned upon.

I may have forgotten some unwritten rules, but the list above gives you an idea of the kind of life I'm supposed to live.

As I grew older and went to school, I was very insecure and ashamed of who I was. I tried to hide my religion from my friends as well as I could. But often I felt like I was missing out on life, since I wasn't allowed to do almost anything.

When the school started to teach about evolution, I was just utterly confused. But since it all made sense, I started to believe in scientific

explanations about the universe. However, I had to watch my mouth at home, because I was afraid that my parents might get mad. Later on I learned that they actually believed in evolution, because "God's day can be a lot longer than ours".

As I became a teenager, I started living a secret life. I listened to modern music, danced if I wanted to and went to movies with my friends. I abandoned religion and became an atheist. However, because I hid everything from my parents, I felt like I had no real control over my life. Future seemed scary and uncertain. I started cutting myself and controlling my eating habits to escape from reality. I was screaming in frustration but no one heard me.

However, now I've decided that I don't want to hide anymore. But coming out of the closet isn't easy. There is no way I could gracefully escape from the cage my family's religion has built around me. Because the Laestadian community is so large and powerful, it will certainly raise a huge fuss if one decides to leave it. I'm happy with my social life and I don't want other people to see me differently. I don't want to become the black sheep. I'm also afraid that people would start ponting fingers at my parents, since my brother came out as a non-believer just about a year ago.

I'm also concerned about the problems this religion causes. All the decision-makers in the community are men. Stressed mothers of oversized families are often depressed. Intolerance of certain people (e.g. gays) is encouraged. Young people feel insecure and lost in today's world, which so eagerly feasts on things that are considered sinful.
I wanted to bring this particular religion to daylight and hear your thoughts on it and the dilemmas I'm facing.

Thank you.