

<b>COMPLAINT NUMBER</b>	21/160
<b>ADVERTISER</b>	Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG)
<b>ADVERTISEMENT</b>	Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG) Television
<b>DATE OF MEETING</b>	10 May 2021
<b>OUTCOME</b>	No Grounds to Proceed

**Advertisement:** The 29-minute Universal Kingdom of God television infomercial for the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God was titled *Faith in Action*. The advertisement included the testimonial of a woman whose new faith has helped her to beat a long history of depression. She says “I don’t take medication any more... I beat my depression through praying and using my faith in god...I’m light, I’m happy, I feel full of love”.

**The Chair ruled there were no grounds for the complaint to proceed.**

**Complaint:**

This is the first formal complaint I have ever written however after witnessing the dangerous content of the broadcast, I feel compelled to express my serious concern about what is being broadcast to potentially vulnerable people.

In the show "religious", there was a very long interview with a woman who was describing her ongoing battles with depression. While she was explaining the details of her life and the nature of her depression, there were two graphics onscreen the entire time. One which said: "Overcame Depression", another which said "Donate" (with a QR code so one could donate).

In the interview, this woman gave a detailed description of how she found her church and by using her faith in god alone, was able to overcome her clinical depression. While making this claim, she also encouraged people to not take, or stop taking anti-depressants or other prescribed medications, maintaining that all you needed was faith in god.

With the overwhelming and serious issues that New Zealand face with regard to mental health, this is very, very dangerous. New Zealand has one of the highest suicide rates in the world. There are many vulnerable people watching this, who could accept the proposition to give them money and ignore medical treatment.

It essentially only takes one person to watch this segment, cease their medication and eventually become another sad statistic.

It is my submission that it is dangerous and irresponsible to broadcast what is essentially a corporation asking for money, while dangerously instructing people to not take life-saving medication.

I anticipate that it could be argued that this is not a current affairs programme, or a factual programme. While I agree that evidence is obviously lacking in this programme, it is extremely real to some people and taken very seriously.

I ask you to please consider your position on continuing to provide a platform to anti-scientific rackets, who prey on the vulnerable and provide dangerous and potentially life-threatening messages.

Thank you.

**The relevant provisions were Advertising Standards Code - Principle 1, Principle 2, Rule 1(h), Rule 2(b), Rule 2(e);**

**Principle 1: Social Responsibility:** Advertisements must be prepared and placed with a due sense of social responsibility to consumers and to society.

**Rule 1(h) Health and well-being:** Advertisements must not undermine the health and well-being of individuals.

**Principle 2: Truthful Presentation:** Advertisements must be truthful, balanced and not misleading.

**Rule 2(b) Truthful Presentation:** Advertisements must not mislead or be likely to mislead, deceive or confuse consumers, abuse their trust or exploit their lack of knowledge. This includes by implication, inaccuracy, ambiguity, exaggeration, unrealistic claim, omission, false representation or otherwise. Obvious hyperbole identifiable as such is not considered to be misleading.

**Rule 2(e) Advocacy advertising:** Advocacy advertising must clearly state the identity and position of the advertiser. Opinion in support of the advertiser's position must be clearly distinguishable from factual information. Factual information must be able to be substantiated.

The Chair said the advertisement before it fell into the category of advocacy advertising and noted the requirements of Rule 2(e) of the Advertising Standards Code. This Rule required the identity of the advertiser to be clear; opinion to be distinguished from factual information and factual information must be able to be substantiated. The Advocacy Principles developed by the Complaints Board in previous decisions considered under Rule 11 of the Code of Ethics remain relevant. They say:

1. That section 14 of the Bill of Rights Act 1990, in granting the right of freedom of expression, allows advertisers to impart information and opinions but that in exercising that right what was factual information and what was opinion, should be clearly distinguishable.
2. That the right of freedom of expression as stated in section 14 is not absolute as there could be an infringement of other people's rights. Care should be taken to ensure that this does not occur.
3. That the Codes fetter the rights granted by section 14 to ensure there is fair play between all parties on controversial issues. Therefore, in advocacy advertising and particularly on political matters the spirit of the Code is more important than technical breaches. People have the right to express their views and this right should not be unduly or unreasonably restricted by Rules.
4. That robust debate in a democratic society is to be encouraged by the media and advertisers and that the Codes should be interpreted liberally to ensure fair play by the contestants.

5. That it is essential in all advocacy advertisements that the identity of the advertiser is clear.

*Role of the ASA when considering an advocacy advertisement*

The Chair noted her role is to consider the likely consumer takeout of an advertisement and complaints about advocacy advertising are considered differently to complaints about advertising for products and services.

The Chair will consider whether the advertisement includes statements of fact or opinion and decide whether any factual claims have been adequately substantiated by the Advertiser. The Chair noted that a fact is something that is objectively true and can be verified as such whereas an opinion is a personal belief. Others may agree or disagree with an opinion, but they cannot prove or disprove it. Some statements contain both fact and opinion.

The Chair observed that in a free and democratic society, issues should be openly debated without undue hindrance or interference from authorities such as the Complaints Board, and in no way should political parties, politicians, lobby groups or advocates be unnecessarily fettered by a technical or unduly strict interpretation of the rules and regulations.

Under Rule 2(e) Advocacy advertising of the Advertising Standards Code:

- The identity of the advertiser must be clear
- Opinion must be clearly distinguishable from factual information, and
- Factual information must be able to be substantiated.

If the identity and position of the Advertiser is clear, a more liberal interpretation of the Advertising Standards Code is allowed.

**The Chair** noted the Complainant's concerns the advertisement preyed on the vulnerable and provided dangerous and potentially life-threatening messages.

The Chair referred to a precedent decision, 20/559, regarding another advertisement for Universal Church of the Kingdom of God which screened on TVNZ One on a Saturday morning and was ruled Not Upheld by the Complaints Board. The advertisement used the testimonials of two woman who were having suicidal thoughts. The Board said the placement and content of the advertisement did not reach the threshold to cause serious or widespread offence when viewed through the lens of advocacy advertising.

The Chair said the precedent decision was relevant to the complaint currently being considered. The Chair noted the advertisement was rated M – Parental Guidance Required by the Commercial Approvals Bureau <https://commercialapprovals.co.nz/how-we-work/cab-classification-system/>. This means it may be broadcast during daytime programmes suited for mature audiences. The Chair noted the advertisement was played after an infomercial and before a programme called “Eat, Shop, Save”, a programme about healthy eating, which was rated G.

The Chair noted the advertisement contained testimonials from people who have turned their lives around after joining the church. One of the women said she no longer requires medication for depression, because she is much happier now.

The Chair said the advertisement did not reach the threshold to undermine the health and well-being of individuals. The Chair said the advertisement did not recommend that viewers should stop taking their medication for depression, it referenced the personal story of a woman who had been able to achieve this, through developing her faith.

The Chair said in the context of advocacy, the advertisement was socially responsible, taking into account context, medium, audience and product and ruled it was not in breach of Principle 1, Principle 2 or Rules 1(h), 2(b) or 2(e) of the Advertising Standards Code.

**Chair's Ruling:** Complaint **No Grounds to Proceed**

**APPEAL INFORMATION**

According to the procedures of the Advertising Standards Complaints Board, all decisions are able to be appealed by any party to the complaint. Information on our Appeal process is on our website [www.asa.co.nz](http://www.asa.co.nz). Appeals must be made in writing via email or letter within 14 calendar days of receipt of this decision.