

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups

Melbourne – Wednesday 23 July 2025

MEMBERS

Ella George – Chair

Cindy McLeish

Annabelle Cleeland – Deputy Chair

Jackson Taylor

Chris Couzens

Rachel Westaway

John Lister

WITNESS

Richard Baker.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. My name is Ella George, and I am the Chair of the Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee. I now declare open this public hearing of our Committee.

I would like to begin this afternoon by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting, the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the Kulin nations. I pay my respects to their elders past, present and future and extend that respect to First Nations people across Victoria. I thank Victoria's First Nations people for their many thousands of years of care for their country.

I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues participating here today. Annabelle Cleland, the Member for Euroa and Deputy Chair; Cindy McLeish, the Member for Eildon; Christine Couzens, the Member for Geelong; Rachel Westaway, the Member for Prahran; and John Lister, the Member for Werribee.

Earlier this year the Legislative Assembly tasked the Legal and Social Issues Committee with an inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups. The Committee will report back no later than 30 September 2026. Today the Committee is holding its first public hearings for this inquiry. This inquiry is not about judging or questioning anyone's beliefs. What we are focused on is the behaviour of cults and high-control groups that use coercive techniques to recruit and control their members and the impacts of these behaviours. On behalf of the Committee, I would like to take this opportunity to thank those who have engaged with the inquiry thus far, particularly the individuals and families who have bravely shared their personal experiences with cults and organised fringe groups.

This afternoon we are hearing from Richard Baker, and I thank Richard for his time and interest in participating in this important inquiry.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live. While all evidence taken by the Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

We will now commence the public hearing. Richard, I invite you to make an opening statement. This will be followed by questions from Members. Thank you.

Richard BAKER: Thanks very much, Ella. Thank you all for the opportunity to be here and for actually listening and giving survivors and people impacted by the types of behaviours the Committee is hoping to hear about an opportunity to be heard. It is a massive thing. As a journalist and just looking at the body of work that has been done in previous years and in previous parliaments and things like that going back 20 years, I was somewhere yesterday and saw a *Four Corners* report from 2008 by Chris Masters, one of Australia's best journalists ever, looking at the very things that you are hearing about and the inner workings of a closed-off group that ex-members would define as a cult. Chris's report was great, and it touched on everything. It had all the emotion and things.

I am just using this as an example, but the institutions, the Parliament, the authorities, the places that can listen and hopefully make some changes and put in some protections—there was not anything that happened. I have seen it in stories I have written and in other things. It can be momentary, and then life moves on and other issues get there. So to actually have the attention space and this concerted effort is a great thing, because I think our society—obviously this is focused on Victoria, but these groups we are talking about are not confined by state boundaries; they are national, across Australia, with international assemblies or an international presence as well. For some of the ones, Australia is the outpost and the control and command is coming from overseas.

My interest in this I guess as a journalist and just as a concerned citizen really started to become more heightened in 2022 when [REDACTED], who was just here before me, contacted me and said, 'Have you ever heard of the Geelong Revival Centre?' I said 'No,' and he reminded me that he and I were in the same primary school; he was a year above me. He said, 'You really should have a look. Do you want to know more?' He sent me a few clips and a few things, and instantly my journalistic radar was going, 'This is unusual. I would like to know more. Tell me.'

So that really kicked off my work, and through [REDACTED] I quickly met some other people. I have to be honest, at first when I heard stories about some of the practices and impacts, the demands I guess, that the leadership would make on members, particularly when they had a family member decide to leave or a family member declares their sexuality as something that is not accepted, I thought the consequences of that were very extreme.

I thought, 'Is this being overblown or overplayed here?' It took me probably six or seven weeks and a number of meetings and getting more immersed to realise that, hang on, this is actually the truth; this is what is happening. I thought, 'What can we do about it?' Obviously I thought, 'Here's a great way of telling a story and opening up a world and trying to explain it.'

I think it is really important to recognise that the knee jerk reaction can be 'These are outliers, these are freaks. Why don't people just leave?' I really wanted to say it is not unusual to be brought into one of these things. There is a reason why people come. They offer many good things: community, a sense of belonging, a sense of purpose and things like that. But it is when you look at the behaviours and how there are no checks and balances in a lot of things. It is controlled really by one man—this is the Geelong Revival place—with a series of supporters and enablers. Since starting that investigation and doing the *Pray Harder* podcast I have been contacted—it is definitely weekly, sometimes daily—by people from that type of environment, that type of church, that revival network but also other groups that I am sure the Committee is going to receive submissions from and hear about.

I guess what drove me after doing the podcast—I thought maybe I am done with this. But no, I thought, 'Let's try and push for some change, expose the behaviours.' It is not to question the rights of people to have faith and belief and things; I am a big supporter of the freedom to do that. But also that does not come without any accountability or responsibility when it is an environment that you may have hundreds of people in and all this power is vested in one person. I do not think it is acceptable in Australian society or any society to have one man who can dictate whether or not you see a member of your own family and have painful consequences for you and use your faith and that belief, that I am saying I believe in and accept, as a weapon against you to control you. I just think that is not right, and I wanted to do something about that and still do. So that is why I am here. I guess that is an opening statement of how I got into it. I did not think, three years after [redacted] first contacted me, I would be sitting here having the opportunity to talk to you about this, but I am very grateful that has happened. If we can give people some freedoms back and choice without those dramatic consequences where they lose family or are told that their spiritual salvation and everything they believe in is gone because they have not done what some old guy says they have to do.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Richard. I might just start off with a few questions generally about high control groups that are operating in Victoria. During your investigations to date, what high control groups have you become aware of that are active within Victoria?

Richard BAKER: Gosh, that is a good question. There is obviously the revival network of churches—in that, Geelong Revival is its own thing—which then has other branches and assemblies. Revival Fellowship is another branch and Revival Centres International. Common beliefs all started from the one position in the 50s or 60s, and then over decades it split into three groups. But the types of shunning or things like that—the tight control vested in one pastor at the top, who is seen as an apostle—are common across the three. Obviously other groups that I have been made aware of, and where people have expressed concerns around coercive control, would include City Builders Church and Casey City Church—I am just trying to get that one right; there are a lot there, and I do not want to mispronounce or put ones in that are not there—through to Jehovah's Witness and Exclusive Brethren. I think it is called the Plymouth Brethren; they might have changed their name. A range of other Pentecostal churches I will take on notice maybe, just for that thing of not wanting to misidentify any in particular, because of my email inbox and texts—it has been going for quite a while now, things there. Before I get off that, there is a group known as Two by Twos and the kidney cult group Shincheonji. I have received information about that, and I am obviously familiar from other reporting around coercive control and recruitment. I think that is a group where recruitment is really interesting, looking at who is being targeted and how and why, but what we see again is the same manifestation of severing of family relationships and the increasing demands after the initial phase. What survivors have told me from many of these ones is that love-bombing feeling of 'Hey, you're one of us now and we're your family,' and over time that love-bombing then seems to turn into a leash, a control, that people feel.

Going back, I also am aware of some even smaller, more insular groups. In ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities, I am aware of practices of shunning and expectations of not going outside the authority structures there when there are problems. That has come through channels with my recent interest, but also I have done some prior reporting on that when I was a reporter with the *Age*, both in Melbourne and in Sydney. There is Scientology—I am just trying to remember some other names for you. It is a fair representation there, and I can get the other specifics when I go back and check.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you. You have investigated several high-control groups across Australia. Are the issues that are before the Committee's inquiry particularly unique to Victoria?

Richard BAKER: No. It is their expectations and demands, because with these groups sometimes the leader controlling them is in Victoria, but if they are part of a broader thing, that leader could be interstate. I mean, there is definitely a strong representation in Victoria, with many, many people living in those high-demand environments. But no, the issues you are looking at are really national issues as well, in my mind.

The CHAIR: So would it be fair to say that some of the coercive techniques employed by an organisation such as the Geelong Revival Centre might appear in similar organisations in other states?

Richard BAKER: Yes, I would agree with that.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Annabelle.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Thank you. You mentioned checks and balances, which is really why we are here. Also, congratulations and well done, because you have probably been instrumental in probably preventing a lot more victims, in Geelong Revival in particular and hopefully in legislative changes even.

I am quite interested in following the money and understanding how maybe the charity status could be protecting the oversight of where money is going. Your last episode in the podcast was a bit of a spin-out. From your investigations, what should we be looking at in terms of more transparency around the finances of these organisations or groups?

Richard BAKER: I think it is a great question, because the structures that we have through the ACNC, which is the charities and not-for-profits commission regulated out of Canberra—but I do believe there are some state things that cross over into that, plus Victoria has its own things around charities. Basically, there is an issue, and the Productivity Commission has done some really good work on this, on what is called a basic religious charity. A lot of the groups, Geelong Revival and other groups that I have looked at and I would imagine the Committee is going to receive submissions or information about, qualify as a basic religious charity. Under the current laws that allows them to operate with minimal transparency even to their own members. The reporting requirements are very lax. There is not a lot of information out there, and to qualify for it you actually do not have to demonstrate any public good.

If you bring it back down to what the person on the street would think: what is the quid quo pro for that kind of status, to have tax-free and things like that? We all respect and recognise that if a place can demonstrate, yes, they do soup kitchens, they provide shelter or whatever—that kind of stuff—there is a demonstrable giving back of public service. I do not think you could have any questions about more organised or bigger Christian groups or other ones. There is no doubt in anyone's mind that the Catholic Church does some public good—welfare and things like that—and Anglicans. But these smaller, more obscure ones that get that same benefit have that same lack of financial transparency, which I think is magnified when you have got a group of a few dozen people contributing financially and tithing and things like that but have no insight into how that money is being expended or for what purpose and neither can the public see what is in there. When you do not find a public benefit from that group, particularly groups that teach segregation or separation from mainstream society, because we are not saved, we are dangerous and you cannot have anything to do with them, I do question that benefit there.

At the moment, from my understanding, putting down 'the advancement of religion' as enough to qualify for charitable status is something I would put a question mark on. I think it is fine to have one thing, but personally—I can only speak for myself here—I think it would make sense to have some sort of public benefit: 'Okay, that's cool, but where is the benefit other than that? Is there something given back for that quid quo pro of what society and what the public is giving you in terms of exemption from tax? Maybe that's just more financial transparency for your own members as a starting point.'

Annabelle CLEELAND: Other checks and balances that we are grappling with: there are a lot of children that become victims in this space as well. Through your investigations, do you have guidance on improving the regulations regarding working with children checks for child members in light of yesterday's news in Geelong as well? Is there anything that we can be looking at to improve the safety of children?

Richard BAKER: Yes. A lot of these places do have childminding services for when there are meetings or services and that kind of stuff going on, so obviously there need to be working with children checks on the people actually trusted with the supervision of those children during those times, as a step one. I think there have historically been some big failures on mandatory reporting in Geelong Revival and things like that from a pastor level. I do not know what the punishment is. This is an open question here—but where is the downside for them? Where is the accountability for when they fail to do that? But also, and this is a tricky area, looking particularly at children born into those environments, what are they being told? What does their life look like? It is a really tough area.

I have listened to hundreds and hundreds of hours of audio, from the revival area in particular, of pastors in Geelong, in Victoria and across Australia. A lot of that messaging I find really concerning for children. I would not like my kids hearing that. It sets them up to think of the world in a way that does not really reflect where Australian society is at in terms of attitudes to gender roles and the purposes for why a woman is here—I think they are regarded as breeding machines. I just do not think that is right. But if you are brought up that way from a young age—I do not know. Where does the state have a role there? I would like to see more visibility of the commissioner for children and young people. I think there is some educative stuff too. It does not all have to be punishment and punitive. I think there needs to be a balance there but also maybe some outreach and some going into these groups that are closed off and that do have messages that might be considered harmful for children to hear or to be brought up with, to have some visibility of what the state already has in terms of those protective measures. That involvement will educate, but it will also be, I would think, like a warning that we have got to do right, we cannot mess up here and we cannot take a risk.

Just on that—I know you have got many questions—I will give you a live example. There is a man, a member of the Geelong Revival network in Newcastle, currently facing serious child sex abuse charges. His trial is listed for later this year. They are on the more serious end of the scale of offending, and it was deemed appropriate, while he is facing these charges, for him to attend a summer camp with hundreds of families. Now, we have the presumption of innocence and all of that, but if someone is facing those charges, wouldn't you have an abundance of caution and say, 'Maybe this is not the right environment for someone who is facing such serious charges to be in—a campsite with dozens, if not hundreds, of children'? I find that troubling.

Annabelle CLEELAND: To say the least. I am allowed two questions only, so can I ask one on notice before I hand it on? Through your investigations, did you find any barriers to seeking information that you felt should be publicly available?

Richard BAKER: Yes, I did find some troubling things. The lack of transparency out of the charities and not-for-profits commission—it is impossible. As a journalist, I feel sorry for the media officers and things like that there. With the way the legislation is and the way it is interpreted, we cannot find out anything, basically, beyond what is published under the basic religious charity provisions. It is kind of pointless asking any questions because you do not get any answers. They do not even update you on the status of their investigations or anything like that. So really, feeding back to the public about what is going on with institutions that are given generous concessions by the public—yes, it feels like it is a bit of a closed shop there. There probably is a bit more room for some transparency. That may be a federal matter, though.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Rachel.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you. Thank you very much for your time in providing such great insight, and you have a depth of insight, so we are very fortunate to be able to draw on that. I am interested in getting some responses to two questions: one is in regard to legislative changes and support, and I know that you have spoken to Annabelle in regard to perhaps the finances and child protection, but in terms of the victims or people leaving these organisations that need support, you have obviously spoken to several people like that. Are there any support services that you have identified that are common ones that they go to or is it completely lacking and we have nothing?

Richard BAKER: That is a really great area to touch on, great question. I think there is a real lack—and this is not a criticism of anybody, it is just because these issues have not really come to a head too much or publicly until now—of qualified or known or funded services for religious trauma. I think Victoria is great on all sorts of

other things, like domestic violence and things like that; we are recognising that sexual assault—we are attuned, I think, as a state and a society to that. But yes, one thing I have noticed is that just because people have broken away in silence in the past and their stories have been suppressed for such a long time, there is a bit of an absence of a pathway of ‘Where do we go,’ and ‘Who is qualified to understand?’ Again, if you have had a lifetime in there, breaking away means—you are raised, from my understanding, from what I have been told and what I have heard, through listening to the sermons and trying to understand doctrine and things—that the world could end at any moment and that you have to be in fellowship in here to be saved. Your salvation is always on the line; you leave and you are not in fellowship, you are condemned to hell. What does that do to your head? But you know you have got to leave because it is not safe, or you are unhappy or whatever. I think having some people qualified to dive into that and help people unpack that would be a great thing and a great comfort. Obviously then too if people are leaving, say, a marital situation where they are feeling unsafe as well, then can they land somewhere? Is there a safe place to go out and then to check in with someone as to, I guess, the deprogram, to help people do that. So yes, definitely I see it as a space where we could do more.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you. The second question that I have is in regard to whether you have ever been invited into or allowed to go into any of these organisations. You have spoken about—and many of the people that we speak to are obviously people that have left—and I am keen to know of the people that exist still in these organisations, some of them are growing in terms of numbers in the congregation, some of them are declining, but certainly in the instance of ones that are growing, is there a level of contentment? Are they happy? What is the point of difference between those that are disgruntled? I do not at all want to trivialise this, but people that might leave a political party, and it has been something that they have been passionate about and they leave, more often than not they are disgruntled, so they are going to talk the negative; similarly with a reformed smoker, and again I am not trivialising it, but I am just wanting to say: is there any other side to this story that you have been exposed to?

Richard BAKER: That is a good question as well. I have tried. I would love to get access and to get in. Unfortunately, so far I have not been successful. I do talk to people who are still on the inside and who cannot get out for a variety of reasons, which come down to coercion, coercive control and fear of losing. They are also disgruntled. I do not deny that there are many people who have a happy experience in these groups as well, but it seems like there are a lot that do not. But that is the same with journalism, whistleblowers or people like that—you always have to look, and there is going to be some discontent. We have got to look at the other side.

I guess it is drilling down into identifying, regardless of the group—is there a pattern of behaviour from the top down on members that seems to be creating the same feeling or creating the same problem in the way a person’s life goes or how they feel about themselves or their ability to have a relationship with their family? I think distilling that, if the Committee is able to do that, would be a good way of delineating between the many that are living happily and growing in number and also looking at what the common thing is that links when there is a problem. Is there a behaviour or a chain of events—do you know what I mean—from the people at the top so we can then go, ‘Okay, we’ve got a pretty clear-cut example many, many times repeated in different groups of something that we think defines unacceptable coercive control’? We can focus on that and not have to limit people’s ability to worship happily and have a happy communal environment. By highlighting those things, it provides, again, an educative example of ‘Hey, is my leadership crossing over into that the red line?’—if you know what I mean. I do not know if I have answered your question there.

I would love to get more access. If anyone is watching and wants me to come along, I am happy to come along. You do want to get the full side of every story. I know in making the podcast I tried many times to speak to Noel Hollins while he was still alive, who was the leader of the Geelong Revival Centre. I even wrote him a long letter, because I knew he was in his nineties and a bit of an old-school guy and that a letter was probably going to be something that he would sit and consider. At least he would appreciate the politeness and the effort. He did ring me to thank me for writing the letter, which was nice of him, and then just said that he had no comment. He just said, ‘You’ve got a job to do. Go do your job,’ which is interesting. Then obviously with his successor Brian Griggs, I tried many times to engage with him and sit down and talk these issues through, to say what had been said to me: ‘What do you have to say to that? How do you counter that? Does this upset you that it’s been said? Are you shocked that I haven’t had that opportunity?’ I am definitely open to doing that.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: John.

John LISTER: Thank you so much for coming in. I think that ties in with a bit of a theme that I want to ask you some questions about around education and around what is happening in these organisations but also the experience of people out of these coercive control organisations. Something that I appreciate about the attitude of people who have provided submissions or spoken to us who have left—or in your own work—is that they want to help people who are not just trying to leave but also reach out to people who are in organisations that have been identified as having concerning behaviour patterns around that high demand and in some cases legally going across the line. What sort of education can government but also the community implement to make the public aware of what these different methods around recruitment or what these different coercive behaviours are? What sort of education can we put in place?

Richard BAKER: Again, I say it after every one, but these are good questions and really good points to consider, because I do not think there is a one-stop shop for addressing this; it is multifaceted. Hopefully something that the Committee can do—and I would commend the Committee if you are able to do this—is actually come up with a really simple warning signs thing: ‘Am I being asked to cut ties to my family? Am I being told where I can live, where I can’t live, when I can take a holiday, when I can’t? Am I being asked to give up my outside hobbies, my social game of tennis or something? I have to be all-in. This is becoming all-consuming.’ We have great education campaigns now around gambling, smoking, excessive drinking, drinking whilst pregnant, TAC things, but we could have a checklist through social media and different things like that where people who are in these groups can have that question that they can ask of themselves about their own situation and then go, ‘This might be a warning sign that my group is no longer just a place where I go to have community and worship. It’s constricting my ability to have my own life and make my own decisions.’

John LISTER: In a similar vein, when thinking about some of these organisations that are probably right on the edge of what the rest of the community would consider acceptable in terms of the demands they place on people, what are some things that these organisations could do internally to be able to have that same sort of transparency around: is this going too far? What are some things that organisations can do themselves, do you think?

Richard BAKER: That is a hard one because you are breaking years and years and decades of not conforming. I know from previous speakers and other people I speak to that a big part of this is seeing this group as exclusive: ‘We’re not like everybody else. We don’t dance to that tune because we’re the special ones. We’re saved.’ So getting that led from the top and getting that implemented whilst the current leadership is there is really hard. I think it is probably having to reach out to the younger generations in there to empower them to exercise change from within about what is acceptable and what is not. Unfortunately, because the pain and the cost of leaving—the price—are so high in many circumstances, they fear taking their own control. So I think if we can find ways as a society and as a state to empower people to challenge from within, but we need the support networks for when, obviously, the blowback is hard and you do get kicked out, because again if you are born into this place, you do not have anything else.

I just got some audio sent to me from Perth of a couple of young women in a revival assembly in Perth who were both born into it. Their whole families are in there and their whole support network, and they have been put out of fellowship by their pastor, one because one of them went to her cousin’s wedding and he said, ‘You can’t go,’ and she went. Again, why do we allow one guy to ruin somebody’s life for attending a family member’s wedding? What business is that of his? It is not his business, and for him to have the power to upset somebody and disconnect—this means that that girl, that young woman, cannot see her father. Her father texts and says, ‘I would love to come round and see you, but I can’t because I’m going to lose my salvation. If he puts me out of fellowship, I’m going to hell.’ How do you break that? So I think it is empowering the next generation within to change the way they do it, to say, ‘Believe in practice, have your faith, but let go a little bit, and you might actually find you get more members.’ It could be a positive thing. So reaching out through them—maybe it is through schools, because many of these places do let their kids go to school but some do not. But they are very watchful of what is taught in schools. I can play you hours and hours of tape about the messaging around First Nations stuff and same-sex issues and things that are contrary to where we are at in our public education system.

I do not know, John. I think getting that next generation—I do not think you are going to change the ones at the top now. I think only accountability and more risk to them personally about going, ‘Hey, you’ve got to toe the line or there’s a consequence.’ But I think the education can come through the next lot.

John LISTER: Thank you for that.

The CHAIR: Cindy.

Cindy McLEISH: Thank you. Thanks, Richard. There are so many questions. I have got a few short, sharp ones if you do not mind.

Richard BAKER: Okay.

Cindy McLEISH: Are all the cults that you have seen based on religious teachings or in the guise of religion?

Richard BAKER: Yes, so far. I have had, I should say, one wellness sort of cult, if you like, or group where things got extreme that did not seem to be so much religious—yes, wellness, also based down near Geelong, actually. Other than that—

Chris COUZENS: A hotbed.

Richard BAKER: Yes.

Cindy McLEISH: What about communes?

Richard BAKER: That one operated as a commune, that one I was talking about. For me, so far, it has been more geographically close. Using Geelong Revival again as an example, there is an expectation that members not live too far away, and if you want to move your family a little bit further, that may not happen, or you need to seek approval. So quite cloistered and close geographically, but not that traditional Hollywood image of, you know, tents on a hill sort of thing. That is not the reality from what I have experienced.

Cindy McLEISH: I was actually thinking a little bit about the Family and Anne Hamilton-Byrne, which was up in Eildon.

Richard BAKER: In Eildon, I know. I am very familiar with that story. Lex de Man, the investigator, did a lot of the work there, and then an old colleague at the *Age* and friend Chris Johnston, the journalist, wrote a book on that.

Cindy McLEISH: She sort of started that up out of, gosh, I do not know, pretending that there was some sort of guise of religious teachings. Is she the only female that has actually ascended to such a role that you know of?

Richard BAKER: Definitely the most prominent one, I think.

Cindy McLEISH: She talked about some old guy before telling her this or that.

Richard BAKER: In the revival and then in the other more extreme Pentecostal ones it is definitely male dominant in the leadership thing. Some of the most concerning stuff, actually—I know you have got a short time to here, but I will keep this brief—

Cindy McLEISH: No, no. That is okay.

Richard BAKER: For me personally, as father of a daughter and things like that, it is the attitude towards the role of a woman and the vulnerability of a girl. You are brought up and raised—this is in the revival example—where you are not really allowed to have any interactions alone or things with boys. In the teenage years there is sort of a separation. It is frowned upon. It is discouraged, and there are consequences if you do so. There is no determinant of an age, but when a brother, a young man turns 18—he could be from an interstate assembly or something like that—he can ring the pastor of another assembly and go. ‘I have an interest in Susie. Do you mind if I come and spend some time?’ Then they will ring Susie’s father. Susie does not get a say, and there is no rule on her age. Now, I am not saying that there are 12- and 13-year-olds there. What I am saying is people are not prepared for relationships as teenagers as we would normally develop and evolve. You get to 17, 18 and then suddenly there is pressure on from a guy you hardly know from interstate who is

expressing his interest in you, and the decision-makers in that chain are the pastor of your assembly and your dad. Where is your say in it?

Cindy McLEISH: Do any of the girls go to girls schools? Do they go to co-ed?

Richard BAKER: Look, I think predominantly co-ed, but I do not know. Also there is a tendency for girls not to be encouraged to academically push too hard, because again, their primary role is to bear children and keep a good house.

Cindy McLEISH: One of the things that I am really trying to grapple with, and I guess we all are, is the purpose. With each one of these fringe religious groups or cults, what is the primary purpose and who is actually the one in charge? I think Ella started by talking about some of the Victorian-based ones or overseas; some of the more prominent ones do have those strong overseas interests. We heard how Noel Hollins was in charge, and I think I have heard previously that pretty well everything just went through him. I did not know whether there was a board that sat around them or if there is one person typically in charge or not. We heard with SJC before I think that there was definitely an Australian head.

Richard BAKER: Yes. In the revival ones there is a of network pastors. Each of those has an elder or a help there, so a senior man, to help the man—pastor—in there. But very much at the top is the Hollins example. People refer to that person as ‘the apostle’—that they have the best connection to God—and then that filters down. But in terms of governance structure and things like that, no. I have seen paperwork that I would like to see more of out of our charities regulator where Noel Hollins—financial things were happening and directors who were directors of a trust were signing off on things they did not know. That part of the document was not shown to them. It was ‘Just sign this’ and money is exchanged.

Cindy McLEISH: You wonder, if there is that one person, where all of that money is, because if they die and do not leave it to the next person –

Richard BAKER: Well, yes. I guess it is held in trust for the group, but it opens up a lot of questions for abuse and for manipulation. For members, that is their money; they do not know how it has been expended. They have no way of finding out. It is how much the pastor wants to divulge.

Cindy McLEISH: So if I make a donation of \$10,000 or perhaps 10%, as we heard earlier, is that tax-deductible?

Richard BAKER: For you or for the –

Cindy McLEISH: For me.

Richard BAKER: I do not know. I am not sure.

Cindy McLEISH: Yes, but then the ATO would be able to follow up if people are making claims on those.

Richard BAKER: That is beyond my knowledge, unfortunately, the tax implications and things like that. I would like to know more about that. It is a really good question.

Cindy McLEISH: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Christine.

Chris COUZENS: Thanks, Richard, for coming along today and your advocacy on this issue. If it was not for you and the Geelong group we would not be sitting here today, so a huge thank you and acknowledgement for everything you have done.

Richard BAKER: Thanks, Christine. Thanks for listening to us.

Chris COUZENS: I am really interested to know how many people you think have made contact with you since you began this work. I can take it on notice if you like, but I was just curious.

Richard BAKER: I could give you a ballpark, and I could probably come back to you. I would say north of 120.

Chris COUZENS: And how many of those would be First Nations people? Do you know?

Richard BAKER: Very few—very few.

Chris COUZENS: Because I hear around that it is an issue for some First Nations people.

Richard BAKER: I am aware, in other states, yes—so Western Australia definitely, this type of doomsday or apocalyptic kind of thing. I am, yes, very familiar with that, with Margaret Court's church. I guess in Victoria and in Geelong the representation of—with the sort of splitting up of what First Nations people we have, they are segregated often from each other too. One thing in these churches: I am not saying that they would not welcome a First Nations member—I am not saying that—but they are very Anglo. One thing, another part of the doctrine, which I find interesting is this notion of Anglo-Saxon primacy. Everyone else, in some talks I have heard from pastors—non-Anglo groups are regarded or described as sixth-day man, created with the rest of flora and fauna, and Anglos are seventh-day man. There is an exceptionalism, so it might not be the most welcoming place sometimes, if you are not from there. But if we were in WA or somewhere like that—definitely a big issue and very interesting, because I have in other parts of my work as a journalist come across it, yes.

Chris COUZENS: Yes. I have had a number of Aboriginal people ask me about the inquiry because they were part of Geelong Revival Centre.

Richard BAKER: Right. Okay. Very interesting, yes.

Chris COUZENS: I have encouraged them to put in submissions.

Richard BAKER: It would be a great perspective to hear from, actually.

Chris COUZENS: Yes. I will have a chat and see if they are interested in having a talk to you.

Richard BAKER: Yes.

Chris COUZENS: Are you aware of any prosecutions in relation to cults? You referred to the Newcastle issue earlier.

Richard BAKER: Yes.

Chris COUZENS: Not just in terms of sexual abuse—are there other areas that you are aware of, even across the country, not necessarily just Victoria, where prosecutions have –

Richard BAKER: There have been, yes, in these groups that we would classify as that. A lot of it unfortunately does come back to sexual abuse, current or historical. There are some financial ones. I think there is a \$670,000 financial fraud allegation that is being tried in Victoria at the moment, which I read about the other day. But classifying abuse is interesting too. I mean, anecdotally—and I can only go off what I have been told—I have interviewed a number of people that have experienced what would be considered domestic violence in these settings. It is interesting, the teachings around the disciplining of children and physical stuff. It is open to interpretation for a father in particular as to how they discipline a child or someone else's child if there is not an authority figure around. There has been a tendency for people to be subjected to some things that, again, in any other setting would not be tolerated and would probably fall under some sort of offence in terms of an assault. Yes. But it does seem that a lot of alleged offending does unfortunately come back to being sexual abuse.

Chris COUZENS: Yes. Given the number of cults that appear to be in our country, how many of those, if you are aware, have international connections?

Richard BAKER: Can I take that on notice?

Chris COUZENS: Yes, sure.

Richard BAKER: Just so I can come back with a better figure, because I would be giving you a guesstimate, and I would rather not.

Chris COUZENS: Yes. That is fine. In terms of what the outcome of this inquiry might be, I am keen to hear your views on legislative change and what the key areas of legislative change are that you see as being most important. Given your experience and your podcasts and all the contacts you have had with people, are there some key elements that you think have to be part of that?

Richard BAKER: Yes, I think there is a need for that, for legislative change. I think if you look at the existing legislation—I am not sure whether Victoria has looked at it—around coercive control and domestic violence there have been some nationally agreed definitions of that. I know specific legislation has been introduced in Queensland, New South Wales and WA, and I think it is in progress in other states. Victoria has looked at it under the family violence Act. But I think there is an agreement at a national attorney-general level of those definitions of coercive control. I think you would take that as a template and bring that across to this group setting and look at the behaviours and the things that we have already classified in a domestic relationship. You have just got to get your head looking at understanding the way the power structure is in many of these groups. With this one guy, if you consider all these people the more vulnerable party or partner, is that person subjecting people to the same kinds of violence that we have already classified over here? In a way we have got a blueprint of what we deem unacceptable, and I think that is the starting point to transpose it.

But for me, I think there does need to be a clear line drawn and a message sent through the *Crimes Act* that a person in charge of a religious group cannot, through punishment of excommunication or other punitive measures, demand that someone not see a member of their own family. That is none of their business. I think if we can capture evidence of someone doing that, that they ought to be held to account through whatever measures the courts and the Parliament would deem necessary. That is, for me, if I can boil it down. That is a person's choice, whether or not they see their family. But I have heard from so many people who are in such pain at not being able to see their grandkids or their son or their brother—and they really want to—because of the fear of what that pastor or that person can do to them.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Can I ask a supplementary question on that. Sorry, Chris.

Chris COUZENS: It is all right. I have finished. Thanks, Richard.

Annabelle CLEELAND: The challenge with that in your comments just there though—and you nailed it in your podcast so well—is that a lot of what could be regarded as the criminal behaviour, the coercive, and the enabling of the pastor's standards and values, I guess, was done by your parents, the people in your circle. With this legislation we have a risk of having the casualties that amplify those relationships breaking down. So how do we skip that level and go to the top?

Richard BAKER: I think a lot of the time that shunning or that expectation to sever connection does come from the top. It is then people making statements that 'I was visited' or 'The pastor came around and told me I'm to have nothing to do with them.' All I can say is in terms of my investigation into this, I am very confident of being able to provide some real evidence of how this plays out. People will be able to make up their own minds. But it is a really good point, Annabelle. It can get messy if there are parents and the layers in there, but for me it is all about what is coming from the top because in these really tightly controlled environments people do not go against it; they do what the top says.

Chris COUZENS: And that is coercive control –

Richard BAKER: And that is coercive control.

Chris COUZENS: coming from the leadership.

Richard BAKER: Yes. It is an expected behaviour or an expected outcome that you will behave in such and such a way when this happens. I will give you another example. What do we do if we have got a family in one of these places and their daughter at 16 says, 'Mum, Dad, I think I'm a lesbian' and the pastor comes around and says, 'This is evil. You need to change your mind. Let's pray about it' and the girl says, 'No. I still feel that way' and the pastor says, 'Well, look, I'm afraid you've got no choice. She's out of fellowship. You've got to get her out of your house'? Now, I have had several people give me accounts of that happening to them or to their friends in places there. Does a pastor have a right to demand that a parent kick out a son or a daughter just because they are gay? Would we tolerate that in another environment? I do not think we would. So why are

they allowed to do that to people? Surely it is the parents' decision, not the pastor's decision, what they do in their own family.

Cindy McLEISH: Isn't it ultimately, though? Are the parents the ones that throw them out?

Richard BAKER: But they do it on pain of losing their salvation. If they do not and they go against the pastor and he kicks them out, they lose their salvation and their remaining kids. They are all out, so they are worried about all those souls being condemned to hell. It is quite the mind trip to go on. But when you understand –

Cindy McLEISH: It is. Because they are in hook, line and sinker.

Richard BAKER: Yes. Because they are using the two most powerful things that a lot of people have in their faith and their family, and they weaponise them.

Cindy McLEISH: That is a good way to put it—weaponising faith and families.

The CHAIR: I have got a few more questions too. Our inquiry is focused on what we can do in Victoria, and we have spoken about the role for coercive control legislation in Victoria, but do you think there is a role for nationally consistent coercive control legislation in helping to prevent the harmful behaviour of cults?

Richard BAKER: Absolutely. Yes. I do. They are in every state and every territory. The same things are happening. On your thing about how many people and things like that, I have spoken to people in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania. Northern Territory is the only one I have not—I do not think I have heard from anyone in the NT, but multiple from all of those other states.

The CHAIR: Also on the legislative responses, how can the Victorian Government balance the right to freedom of expression, religion and belief while also addressing and regulating harmful high-control groups? For example, how would a government balance your individual rights to freely associate with the need to protect people from being threatened with leaving a group?

Richard BAKER: I think by drawing a line on getting those clear definitions of what is unacceptable coercive control within a group set by a leader. It may be five key points or things like that that still allow free will and free exercise but take away the ability of a leader to act in a punitive way, that if someone does not do what they say—and it is not a spiritual thing, it is just a control thing. For example, again going back to family and the expectation of severing links if someone leaves or if they are kicked out for a punishment. There is the Perth example I gave you of the girl who went to her cousin's wedding and is now out of fellowship for six to 12 months or whatever and her dad wants to see her but is worried about that. I think that example gives us an idea of what unacceptable coercive control from the person at the top looks like. Does taking away a pastor's ability to threaten someone not to see their daughter in that situation or to even kick that girl out—like, really? I do not understand how that, spiritually or anything, interferes with his ability to run the church or for people to practise their belief. All that does is put so much power and control on people who I think are egomaniacs and dangerous, and it is unhealthy and it is unnecessary.

I think with thought, I am not denying that there is a lot to think about—and this is a nuanced area and we have to be really careful about not trampling over things or unintended consequences—but I do think stripping it back and applying that template that is already there for the domestic settings and then just realising and using the submissions and the evidence you are going to be getting about how that plays out in that group setting will help make those definitions and make sure that if there is a legislative change, that it is appropriate and proportional and fair and not interfering with anyone's right to freely associate or believe.

The CHAIR: Throughout your investigation, you have made contact with many religious organisations, although not much luck with some, by the sounds of it. Have they passed on to you any of their perspectives about this, about some of the topics we are exploring in the inquiry or around their rights to freedom of expression and running their organisations?

Richard BAKER: I have not had a lot of positive engagement, but I have had access to talks or internal things where those topics have been covered, and I would say broadly speaking they take some comfort in

being able to hide behind religious freedom and that that can be used as a bit of a shield for bad behaviour or damaging behaviour, which is a bit of a problem. I got a really interesting document actually that I might ask permission from the author to share with you guys. This is a former pastor in the Geelong Revival Centre who is now—I am not sure if he is a pastor but he is an active member in the revival fellowship, but he wrote a very thoughtful long piece about how the group he was in drifted from healthy church to cult. This is coming from an insider who is not wanting to destroy these places, but it is a really interesting firsthand experience of what he observed and experienced, with him and his own family in that setting. I might ask permission if I could share that with you, because it really articulates what your question is about really well.

The CHAIR: Thank you. You briefly mentioned earlier the commissioner for children and young people, and you mentioned that they could have more of a role to play. I think it was around the education and awareness side of this. Are you able to expand on that a bit further?

Richard BAKER: Yes. I am aware there have been some disclosures made to that office, to the commissioner, about some groups in Victoria that I have looked at or am looking at now. That has occurred to me, the commissioner and her staff being, I guess, empowered and maybe having the budget, the resourcing, to go out and pre-emptively go into groups where there are not really any clear structures or governance or accountability frameworks, where you can clearly see power is vested in one person and you know there are a number of children in there and go in and look at, 'Tell us about your safety protocols, your procedures, your working with your children checks. What happens if an allegation is made? Do you have a framework for mandatory reporting disclosures? Do you understand the legislation? Do you understand what your obligations are? Because we take this very seriously.' I think that would be getting out and hopefully getting ahead of the problem. I think there is that educative role, that the protection of young people and children is something this state takes seriously. We want to prevent sexual abuse and these awful situations that unfortunately we see go through the courts and that. We want these groups to be able to recognise the warning signs and have that front of mind rather than it being an afterthought, and also because it is illustrative.

There was a horrific child sexual abuse case in the Geelong Revival Centre with an offender Todd Hubers and in the judgement the County Court judge—on his sentencing, actually—made some particular remarks that it was telling that parents of some victims went to the pastor before the police. That tells you something that is different to how the rest of society operates. You are putting in someone else's hands the people you love and protect the most to make a decision for you—again, because of the coercive control. Because what if I do it and pastor does not like it? What then? I do not know. But the role of the commissioner could be getting out to make sure that the practices and procedures and child supervision and all of those things are front of mind rather than an afterthought.

The CHAIR: Okay. That leads well into the next couple of questions I have around vicarious liability. You have probably seen some reporting in the *Geelong Advertiser* yesterday about some more alleged child sexual abuse offences. I understand, in relation to this, the GRC has maintained that there is no legal basis for establishing liability even if the abuse has occurred. Putting this case specifically aside, but just more generally speaking, should the GRC be liable when it has been found that abuse occurred and was perpetrated by its volunteers?

Richard BAKER: I personally believe that any organised religion or group should be liable, yes, when provable offending against children has taken place in an environment where they have set up the structure of supervision or the arrangements there. So if a person has, let us say, volunteer status to perform a certain role and then goes on to abuse, well, that should be on the organisation that has allowed that to happen, and it is happening under their roof, under their watch. Just because that person is not getting a pay cheque does not diminish the responsibility.

The CHAIR: How does the Victorian Government address this when you have an organisation like the GRC set up without those formal employment relationships between the GRC and its senior leadership group?

Richard BAKER: I think we need to re-look at the legislation around that, and I think the High Court's decision, in their judgement, was almost appealing for states to do so.

The CHAIR: Just one final question from me. In Christine's questions earlier she was speaking about prosecutions, and I am just wondering if you can tell us a bit more about where prosecutions might be failing or

where there are people who might want to take legal action or report incidents to police but there is no legal basis to do so?

Richard BAKER: One thing that seems to happen with prosecutions is that there is a great reluctance of people to speak out and to bring the secular or the outside world within. That is a starting point. A lot of things are swept under the carpet, or historically have been anyway. There is a case going through the County Court right now involving another church—I do not want to say the name because I may get it wrong, but I have the information there—where the leader/pastor of that church is facing abuse allegations that were first made to police 20 years ago. Then pressure came on internally and those statements were withdrawn. That is now only happening 20 years later. So that is an example, I guess, of where things from the first step can fail because of the pressures inside to not bring the outside world in—to keep this internal to us and let pastor sort it out. Then I think once it reaches that next level, so say a disclosure or a report is made, Victoria has really good SOCIT teams. I think the work done there is generally exceptional. We are often dealing with child witnesses, parents who are conflicted again because of how they have been brought up in this particular place and how they regard authority and then the role of a pastor. So it can get complicated, Ella—more so than a normal situation, just because there are more layers of interference and more fear of trusting the state.

How are things failing? Just with the general difficulties, I guess, of prosecuting such cases once it gets there. But even getting them to that first base—I think, again, empowering people that it is okay to do this, that this is not going to send you to hell and that this is what being a good parent is. And limiting the power of a pastor to interfere and stop a parent or their child from disclosing abuse. That guy should not have a say in it. That is not his business; that is your business. If we can get people to break that chain a bit and for those guys at the top to know that they cannot play God anymore, it would be a good thing.

The CHAIR: Okay, great. Thank you. Any other questions?

Cindy McLEISH: Just one quick one. What frightens you most?

Richard BAKER: About this? I worry about the kids. They do not have a say. They are born there or parents choose to go, but then their whole life is set up for them in a way that they do not get a chance to choose another way. Or if they do, it means letting go of family. To get out—to escape—you have to be prepared to lose a relationship with mum, dad, brothers, sisters. Or you stay in and put up with the lottery that you get in there. That worries me. I do not like that.

Cindy McLEISH: Yes, you said ‘weaponising faith and family’. I think that was really well put.

Richard BAKER: Yes, it is catchy.

Cindy McLEISH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you very much, Richard, for appearing before the Committee today. Before we finish up, was there anything else that you would like to add?

Richard BAKER: No, just thanks for the opportunity again—really thoughtful questions and many layers. I appreciate that this is not an easy area to go into, but I think it is an important one that can make a lot of improvements. I will come back with those specifics for you.

The CHAIR: Great. From today you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check, together with any questions taken on notice. Verified transcripts and responses to questions taken on notice will then be published on the Committee’s website. I declare this meeting adjourned. Thank you.

Committee adjourned.