

# **T R A N S C R I P T**

## **LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE**

### **Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups**

Melbourne – Wednesday 5 November 2025

#### **MEMBERS**

Ella George – Chair

Annabelle Cleeland – Deputy Chair

Chris Couzens

John Lister

Cindy McLeish

Jackson Taylor

Rachel Westaway

#### **WITNESSES**

Maria Esguerra, Director, and

Miriam Francis, Director, Olive Leaf Network Australia.

**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 declare open this public hearing of the Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and future.

I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues who are participating today: joining us online are John Lister, the Member for Werribee; Jackson Taylor, the Member for Bayswater; and Rachel Westaway, the Member for Prahran. Other colleagues are expected to join us shortly.

On 3 April 2025 the Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee was referred an inquiry into cults and organised fringe groups. The terms of reference require the committee to inquire into cults and organised fringe groups in Victoria, the methods used to recruit and control their members and the impacts of coercive control, and report back no later than 30 September 2026.

This inquiry is not about judging or questioning anyone's beliefs. What we are focused on are the behaviours of cults and high-control groups that use coercive techniques to recruit and control their members and the impacts of these behaviours. The evidence we are hearing will continue to help the committee shape practical and balanced recommendations. On behalf of the committee, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have engaged with the inquiry thus far, particularly the individuals and families who have bravely shared their personal experiences with coercive high-control groups.

Today the committee will hear from Maria Esguerra, Director of the Olive Leaf Network, and Mirriam Francis, also a Director of the Olive Leaf Network, and I thank Maria and Mirriam for participating here today.

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, and I welcome Maria and Mirriam to provide opening statements. Thank you.

**Mirriam FRANCIS:** Thank you. My name is Mirriam Francis. I am a resident of Victoria and a cult survivor advocate. My lived experiences occurred in Victoria and New South Wales, as well as the United States and England. As a Director of the Olive Leaf Network, I provide aid to survivors of high-control groups. I raise awareness for systemic harms, investigate gaps in legal frameworks and advocate for legislative reform. My areas of focus are child rights and child safety.

I see the gaps in our system, perhaps because I was a child whose harm slipped through the cracks. Australian law recognises that the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection before as well as after birth. It is guided by the best interests of the child, meaning that in all actions concerning children, their safety, wellbeing and healthy development must be a primary consideration. The child's vulnerability demands special protection. Our laws already reflect this in many ways, providing greater freedoms for adults compared to the limitations placed upon children's activities and exposures, such as employment, the consumption or serving of alcohol, smoking, access to gambling, nightclubs and forms of entertainment. There are even age restrictions on movies. The government identifies areas of risk for children, but it does not distribute its gaze equally. For children in cults, there are no safeguards. There are no ratings on their exposures. There are no restricted areas.

In 1965 an inquiry for the state of Victoria found Scientology's principles to be 'perverted and ill-founded, and its techniques debased and harmful'. But it failed to investigate what was being done to children, providing only one sentence in its over 200-page unrelieved denunciation of Scientology regarding any risk to children, stating that:

... scientology is potentially the same danger to children as to adults ...

In 1983 the High Court of Australia gave Scientology the key to unlock the gate which had been put in place to limit their activities of damaging psychological practices, and Scientology uses that key, quoting the High Court of Australia, to export their brand of deviance to other countries.

I was born into Scientology in Sydney in 1984. Throughout my childhood I experienced what the 1965 inquiry report described, and I have included just a couple of quotes here:

In auditing sessions, where the preclear is not allowed to have inhibitions or to show reticence or reluctance to revealing and discussing the most intimate things, sexual matters are frequently discussed at length and in startling detail.

The other quote is:

This unrestrained dwelling upon sexual topics is sought to be justified by scientologists on the basis that such discussions are 'in session', as though that circumstance regularized the debased and erotic prying which psychiatric evidence described as harmful and as bordering on voyeurism in the auditor.

At eight years old I would lock myself in the bathroom to escape the woman.

**Maria ESGUERRA:** Want me to read, Mirriam?

**The CHAIR:** Mirriam, would you like to take a short break?

**Mirriam FRANCIS:** I am okay.

**Maria ESGUERRA:** Ice water.

**Mirriam FRANCIS:** At eight years old I would lock myself in the bathroom to escape the woman and her endless questioning. I lied and said I needed to pee. I ran water in the sink while she knocked. I lied and I said I was hungry. She came back with pieces of cheese. I ran out of excuses. Back to the chair. Back to the machine. Back to the unthinkable questions. I held the metal cans that were cool to the touch and were connected by wires. Sometimes she would warm them before placing them in my hands, asking if I was comfortable. I lied and said I was, because I knew that it did not matter; only she could say when it would stop. Back to the unthinkable questions. She used the machine to find my thoughts. I was not allowed to hide anything. I was not allowed to say no. There is no safe word in Scientology.

The Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission has such gaping holes and so few guidelines that it allows organisations to financially benefit from their lack of scrutiny. *Dianetics*, which is Scientology's most widely distributed book, describes that a seven-year-old girl who shudders because a man kisses her is wrong because she should see nothing bad in a kiss from a man, not even a passionate one. Scientology is selling this book on our streets of Victoria, at market stalls and public events, even the Royal Melbourne Show. They are selling this book just outside of this house of Parliament.

Victoria requires that organisations which provide services to children must apply child safety standards. But what if an organisation does not recognise that children are children? How does the government intervene for the safety of those kids? Scientology in Melbourne, which is 6 kilometres away from us today, provides a child grooming course, teaching that children are not children, that they are small adults. I know what it is to be treated as an adult in a small body, to bear adult expectations, to face adult exposures and to have adult experiences on my child body. When the federal government supports the financial benefit from these activities, this is not negligence, it is complicity. This is institutional child abuse backed by the government of this country and the state of Victoria. Differentiation between an adult and a child is the most fundamental law in child safety and human decency. If an individual or group is unwilling to recognise that difference, they should not be permitted near children. Any venue providing adult-only, not-safe-for-kids experiences must not have children inside of it. Any material that contains adult-only, not-safe-for-kids content must not be provided to kids.

Cults are closed-door systems, meaning that there is no-one to intervene. Abuse in such settings is compounded. It is prolonged, torturous and has devastating consequences. Following the findings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, the child safe standards and reportable conduct scheme and the state commissions responsible for them were supposed to provide an entrance to closed-door systems. Yet in the Jehovah's Witnesses, where the royal commission found complete failure to protect children, there still exist the same causation factors which allow for child sexual abuse to occur. The

problem has not been solved. I have quite a bit of detail about that, and I would like to do a supplementary submission on that alone. It is hard, because there is so much to say. I have only got one paragraph mentioning Jehovah's Witnesses, and it needs more. It needs so much more than that, so I would like to submit more information about that separately.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mirriam. We would welcome a supplementary submission.

**Mirriam FRANCIS:** Thank you. The doors of cults remain shut, and there is no mechanism to slow the tally of child victims who are experiencing governmental discrimination when it comes to their protection. How long should we hurt before you say stop? It must be written into law that no child can be martyred. A child cannot be groomed or sexualised for an ideology. A child cannot forfeit their rights, nor sign any contract or commitment which would bind them to any person, organisation, group or institution. They must not be subjected to surveillance, interrogation or psychological or medical violation or deprivation.

We need robust systems which prioritise prevention and early intervention, relieve the burden on children and hold parents and caregivers accountable for placing children at risk. We must not limit accountability through only the judicial system, which forces a heavy burden upon victims, but through strengthening systems, including filtering charity status through an assessment of harms by the ACNC. We need child safety and child rights-focused awareness strategies linked with lived experiences to raise social conscience. We do not leave people ignorant and defenceless. We adopt a holistic approach through the health and community sectors and create accessible and meaningful pathways for recognition, redress and recovery. We will be effective by engaging the people of Victoria and Australia and empowering our vulnerable populations. It is time to open the door on closed systems which are harming kids. Thank you.

**Maria ESGUERRA:** I am here today with two hats. I am a registered psychologist – well, three hats, I guess – with a lot of training in complex trauma, coercive control and cultic abuse. And I am, obviously, a director of a charity that is designed to support people to leave cultic groups. I am also a survivor born into the Children of God – now it is called the Family International. Today I am really going to focus my discussion on the developmental disadvantages experienced by children born into cults.

Children are regularly forgotten. The constant narrative is 'Why do people join cults?', and that is the wrong question. I know 70 per cent of the people in the Children of God were born into it, and I think a lot more people are harmed – significantly more harmed. But a lot more people are also born in. The question we need to ask is 'What impact does being raised in a totalistic, authoritarian environment have on the development of a child?' The continued use of recruitment and membership in the context of children is not semantic.

**The CHAIR:** I am so sorry to interrupt you, Maria. We have an emergency alarm in the hallway, so we might just find out if this is an evacuation.

We will take a short adjournment and be back shortly. Thank you.

### Hearing suspended.

**The CHAIR:** We will now recommence our public hearings of the Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups. To anybody watching at home, we do apologise for the interruption. We had an emergency evacuation here at Parliament House, but everything is all settled and we are back here.

We will continue with the Olive Leaf Network Australia's evidence today. We had other witnesses scheduled to appear before us. We have rescheduled Decult to 3:15 pm and Barwon Adolescent Task Force will be rescheduled for another day. Our committee website will be updated with those times once that is confirmed. But now I will hand back to Maria to continue her opening statement. Thank you, Maria.

**Maria ESGUERRA:** All right. I am going to start again. As I said, I am here as a registered psychologist. I have got significant training and lots of experience, over a decade, in complex trauma, coercive control and cultic abuse. And most importantly, I am also a survivor of the Children of God, which is now called the Family International.

Today I really want to focus the discussion on developmental disadvantages experienced by children born into cults, as children are regularly forgotten in the conversation. A lot of times people are asking ‘Why do people join cults?’ But that is actually the wrong question. The majority of the people in cults, I would say, are children. So the question we need to ask is ‘What impact does being raised in a totalistic and authoritarian environment have on the development of a child?’ Using terms like ‘recruitment’ and ‘membership’ in the context of children is not semantic, it is actually a primary barrier to protection. The language incorrectly assigns agency to a child, misclassifying a child protection crisis as a religious or a lifestyle choice.

The committee must maintain a clear distinction between adults and children through this inquiry, recognising children’s particular rights and protections and vulnerabilities, and this includes yesterday’s children – the ones who are living with severe challenges today, or ending their lives. The consequences of this are immediate and devastating. I personally have lost family members to suicide. I have also had to support five of my closest siblings and peers just in the last two months with psychiatric care. Two attempted to end their lives. In a study, cult child survivors reported personally knowing 6.8 people who had suicided and 6.5 who had an early death, and 14.8 who had attempted suicide and not completed. All of these children were born into the cult.

I know the scope of the inquiry has been quite broad. When I say ‘cult’, I am using Langone’s definition. It is an absolutist ideology that dictates harsh physical discipline or the rejection of medical intervention. It is a closed and physically isolated society often, or maybe mentally, also using religious beliefs to justify ideology and its reclusive nature, so there is a lot of rationalisation for child abuse as well as limited interaction with mainstream society members who could be protective. To be clear, this is not religious trauma or abuse; this is institutional abuse.

I was born an Australian citizen, yet I was raised with no access to the rights and protections that I should have been afforded. This included that I never went to school. It also included medical neglect: I was unvaccinated, I broke my nose and never saw a doctor, I suffered many childhood illnesses and even my basic need for glasses was not addressed. I had debilitating migraine headaches growing up. As a child I was taking care of children myself. I was fundraising. This is a clear violation of child labour laws. There has never been a time in my life that I have not been responsible to bring in finances, even from the age of two. Time was spent doing this work and not on my educational or play needs. I also lost my father to a treatable illness, and he was blamed for his sickness by over 10,000 members. He died confused, alone and shunned. Having been separated from my mother and my siblings through the cult’s strategic breakdown of familial connections, including in the Victorian school home when I was only eight years old, and never knowing my external relatives, this disconnect is immense. The pain is compounded: I recently found out that my biological grandparents both received the Order of Australia. It is very rare for a couple to both receive it. The main influence in my childhood was an American criminal and a paedophile: David Berg, the leader of the Children of God cult. I call this a cultural orphanhood. This causes me to struggle profoundly to even just feel Australian.

There is a lot of focus on the abuse that occurs within cults, but it does not really talk about the long and complex trauma and the recovery afterwards. For those of us, there are profound developmental deficiencies and neglect. If you look at psychology theories – sociocultural and ecological attachment theories and Erikson’s stages of development – you can see how catastrophic this upbringing is. For children raised in cults it is particularly difficult because they lack fundamental developmental care and infrastructure.

To try to make it simple, I am just going to compare an average Australian child – and of course there are a lot that grow up with trauma, but I am just going to compare what you might think is average – and a cult child. Two children suffer sexual abuse, which is very common in cults and among some of my peers – I think it is over 77 per cent in the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and in the Exclusive Brethren it is over 50 per cent, from Dr Aebi-Mytton’s work. A non-cult child, while traumatised, can potentially rely on established social and legal infrastructure. A cult child is denied all of these infrastructures to support their recovery. An average child might be able to get support from their parents or their peers, and they might even understand some of this abuse. In a cult, family structures are destroyed. Parents are enforcers; they are not protectors. Survivors who speak up are shamed and shunned. At eight, my mother told me to pick my nose to turn off a perpetrator, rather than intervening.

Moral structures – most children know right and wrong; they have a framework to contextualise the abuse. In a cult there is a lack of a moral reference system. The way I grew up, sexual assault was actually deemed as godly. In purity culture a lot of the time it is the child’s fault. With protective figures – like teachers – public

awareness, community and support, there could be empathy and recognition. For a cult child there are no protective factors, and after leaving, a lot of the time they are stigmatised and are disbelieved. Worse yet, many of us will never tell anyone we grew up in a cult, and I know a lot of people that have a completely secret life. In fact that was me one year ago. Anke was the one – I call her the midwife; she brings all our stories out. You will talk to her. I was terrified for 20 years to even tell anyone because of the stigma and the shame and because we are targeted.

Loaded language – in cults there is a jargon. Basically, a cult child learns loaded language, and it is difficult to actually communicate with other people. For us, sex was called sharing. If I went to the police and said, ‘An uncle shared with me,’ that would not have made any sense to them, but it was child rape.

Legal – there are legal precedents, there is justice and there is redress. For a cult child, legal recourse is nearly non-existent. There is also aggressive lawfare by the cult a lot of the time, with an entire institution against a child or a young person. There are decades-long statutes of limitations.

There is also psychological support. There might be modalities about child sexual abuse for psychologists. For a cult child there is hardly any professional recovery framework. Psychologists, a lot of the time, have no training in cult-related trauma or its developmental consequences.

A sense of identity – most children have a sense of where they have come from. They are Australian and there is a sense of who they are, safety and structure. A cult child does not have any of that. They miss childhood development stages. They lack a sense of belonging or even knowing who they are. They have minimal shared commonalities with the outside world, and support networks are very difficult.

When you compare these two cases, the differences in available support are vast. Cult-born survivors experience multiple and compounding traumas – sexual, physical and emotional – and developmental, social, educational and medical neglect. In a final act of violence, many times they are excommunicated or shunned for even speaking up. There are extensive workloads and added responsibilities from a young age, and they are left with no infrastructure to support their recovery. So we have to rebuild from zero, we have to unlearn everything we are taught, we have to deconstruct our entire worldview and we have to deal with the basic survival needs, even before we can think about the traumatic impacts of what we have been through. Many times this complex trauma surfaces when we have our own children. There are many times a deep grief for what was lost, and there is also risk of passing this on to the next generation. As a teenage mother myself, I almost lost my son to meningitis because of the cult’s doctrines. He does live now with an acquired brain injury, and I am his lifelong carer. Even though I had no access to information or knowledge or the outside world, I have to live with that moral injury every day.

In 1992 the cult was raided here in Victoria. They – you – had the information and the capacity to intervene to protect the children from the abuse and neglect. The legal intervention was inadequate. Hope for rescue was destroyed for us. Instead the doors slammed even more closed behind us. It set me up for another 10 years of abuse in the cult and a lifetime of extreme difficulty for me and my peers. I was one of those neglected and abused unprotected children, and the critical question is: why do I have to stand before you right now, grown up, decades later, just to try to compel someone to act on this crisis? The children never chose this. They are never members of a cult; they are always victims. Now it has been left to us to right the wrongs and fight to protect others. As Dr Levine says, trauma is not what happens to us, it is what happens inside of us in the absence of an empathetic witness.

I have a few recommendations here to really support. If you want to know what needs to be done, it is that infrastructure – develop that infrastructure for children. The commitment to child safety cannot stop at the door of high-control groups. Every child in this country deserves the same rights and protections. From the therapeutic side, it is really important that we focus on cult abuse. Really it is a cultural competency. Psychologists have an obligation to actually learn about what they are treating and how to support people. So therapeutic training – there is a lot of really good therapeutic training. I have done training with Dr Lalich, Dr Hassan and Dr Jenkinson. I have travelled all over the world for the last two years, with hundreds of thousands of dollars going into understanding this training. It is about attachment. Most have disorganised attachment – 90-odd per cent. I think 96 per cent of us say our relationships are impacted by having such harmful relationships – relational trauma. Complex trauma therapy and, really, identity construction – that is important.

I think if we look at policies and things, there are things happening overseas, particularly in New Zealand with the Gloriavale community. When we look at totalistic communities, it is really important that they have mandated regular and confidential access to independent medical and mental health care, including more of the soft services or maybe midwives – a lot of times they have huge amounts of babies – and people coming in. We can see that Willow Duffy – she is a nurse and she works with child safety – has got an amazing course, and she has developed a relationship. They found out one of the practices was actually basically suffocating babies when they cried, so there could be hundreds of children with hypoxic brain injuries from that. You are not going to find it out by putting more legislation in place, because these places do not care. The outside world is evil and bad, and they are the only ones that know how to raise kids. It is a slow cultural change, and it is about having those soft services going in there and finding out what is going on.

It is really important that we explicitly weave institutional and cultic abuse into family and sexual violence policy strategies, otherwise it is going to just be invisible and unfunded. In the UK they have got amazing training called Prevent training for radicalisation – and radicalisation really is just what a cult is. We need to look at the systems of that. That is mandatory for all health workers and mental health workers. I think that is really, really important. I know a lot of cult survivors, like I said, and I have got five that have gone into involuntary psychiatric care. Those institutions are terrifying and scary for someone who grew up in an institution like ours. Having forced confessions all the time growing up, we are significantly disadvantaged in the legal systems as well; I know a lot that are in jail now from the Children of God. So it is a whole-round approach. We really need to teach everyone working with this particular type of trauma and the developmental and institutional abuse to understand what they are working with.

Then there are these dedicated exit supports. Liz Gregory has got the Gloriavale Leavers' Support Trust, where she is funded to actually support people leaving. It is a refugee-style service. It is not just some therapy. It is helping people actually come out and create their life, and we are talking about multigenerations of people. I met her in Barcelona a couple of years back, and she talked about her thing. Three of us survivors were just bawling our eyes out, and we just said we would not have lost so many if Liz was there. That is what Mirriam and I aim to do.

It is really important that we also ratify the child rights, and that is: the right of every Australian child to adequate education; a right to choose their own belief systems, including non-belief; a right to emotional, psychological, physical and spiritual safety; and a right to their own body autonomy.

SGAs, or people who grow up in cults, are some of the most resilient, powerful, intelligent people I have ever met. They are hungry and they are hardworking, and we just need to stop seeing them just as victims or weird people on a Netflix documentary but instead as cultural translators. We can actually bridge the gap between these insular, totalistic communities and open democratic systems. We can actually support our community and country to not go down the path of other countries right now – because we see it. I met Dr Hassan in Barcelona, and he said, 'You guys are the immune system of the world right now. You're the white blood cells. You can see danger and you can tag it,' because we grew up in that. We know what it is like. Being seen as people that are beneficial when we can actually support you – I actually believe that the Wieambilla shootings and Porepunkah would not have happened if you came and talked to us and we explained to you what it is like and the mindset.

We do not want anyone to go through what we did. There are still children in these environments, and there are yesterday's children, who need intervention. You have the power. You have the obligation to be an empathetic witness and to do something about this health crisis. It is a public health crisis. We owe these children nothing less than the full protection and support of the state.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Maria and Mirriam, for your very powerful opening statements. On behalf of the committee can I say thank you for sharing your own experiences with us and thank you for sharing some of your recommendations too. I will start with some questions, and then I will hand over to some of my colleagues online. Firstly, I would just like to talk about children in cults and high-demand groups. You emphasise in your submission that children born into cultic or high-demand groups are among the most hidden and undeserved victims of systemic abuse in Australia. What can the Victorian government do to better protect children in these circumstances?

**Miriam FRANCIS:** We are wanting to have more engagement to bridge that gap, so actually going in. I think you referred it as like the soft approach. It does not need to be heavy-handed. We just want the same equality and standard of safety that is in other institutions. There should not be any reason why that cannot happen. We just need to stop being so inhibited in the way that we go about things. The children in there deserve an equal standard of safety. The way that that can be adopted – again, Gloriavale is a great model for that. We would recommend that Liz Gregory from the Gloriavale leavers trust have a full hearing herself so that she can speak to the specific ways, because that is an exact example taking place in New Zealand currently, and it has been going on for some years. The department of education there has taken notice and has actually put the school on notice, so the regulatory things are coming in. It is because there are people on the ground who are child protection, child safety and safeguarding-aware. That is why we also recommend Willow Duffy as well – I think the organisation is Safeguarding Children New Zealand – as an expert on this topic of how to integrate and come into a community in a gentle way that is empowering for people and that provides education, because first and foremost it is a cultural issue. Like you would need to bridge that gap between any culture, it is about education and awareness and working with people. You cannot just go in with the heavy hand of the law.

**Maria ESGUERRA:** Just thinking of my own experience, we were raided and then we were all dumped back. Then they just said, ‘Go do some socialisation.’ Of course we were only allowed to pick things where we did not actually talk to anyone, so horseriding or tennis or something like that. I just think instead of the raids at dawn – which were the Antichrist soldiers that had been predicted our whole lives were coming, and we were told exactly what to say – if they came in and just said, ‘Hey, look, these kids, we just need to make sure they’re getting educated well and that they’ve got opportunities. I understand this is your lifestyle, that’s good, but these kids need opportunities,’ then slowly developed and gained our trust, they would have started to get a lot more information. They would have seen practices that were horrifying, and then we would have been able to do something. But it takes some time.

Every child in Australia – just like in the Elizabeth Struhs trial; they are all in jail now for not giving her medication – deserves the right to life and the right to opportunities. I think that is the only way we can go, because we really cannot regulate adults that much. Adults can kind of make decisions. I would not want the government regulating adults’ lifestyles that much unless it is illegal, but we have to regulate for these children’s opportunities. Adverse childhood experiences are the number one risk to mental health and physical health. There is never-ending research about it. If children are having a lot of adverse childhood experiences and neglect, their lives are going to be incredibly shortened and harmed.

**Miriam FRANCIS:** The other thing I was going to add to that as well is that to actually step into an organisation, there needs to be somebody that is not just buying their pitch at the doorstep: ‘Okay, great. Well, let’s step inside. Let’s have a look. Let me open this book and see.’ Because in Jehovah’s Witness the material that they are exposing to children is sexual and it is graphically violent. Not only that but the children are experiencing sustained exposure. This is weekly exposure in the meetings, where the descriptions and the level of detail would make your hair stand on end – the graphic material that is in those books and their publications, the information that they are providing to children, the stories that they are telling. For example, there is one-on-one Bible study that occurs. There are 60 lessons which take place during the lead-up to a child’s baptism. This typically takes place over the course of a year. It is very intensive, about an hour or two at a time. The child is alone with an adult, and the material that the child is being exposed to is incredibly graphic and disturbing. We do have a role there to regulate that, like we do regulate any other exposure of an explicit nature for children. Children should not be living with these things. And then they are trying to attend school. How are they going to pay attention in class when they are also being told that the end of the world is coming at any moment and everybody is going to die? How do they connect with their friends? How do they participate and connect to the education system or their future?

**The CHAIR:** I have just got a follow-up question to that. You spoke about a soft entry point into these types of organisations – to go softly and to educate people along the way. How would a government or relevant authorities know that there was a problem that needed to be addressed? What is that trigger point for, I suppose, entering an organisation and providing that support?

**Miriam FRANCIS:** The thing is that then you are expecting the children to self-report, and we know that in family domestic violence situations, a victim does not report until much later. The royal commission also showed that it took on average 23.9 years before a victim would report. There should be inquiry and conversation and interaction, which is what I would expect, for example, with the Commission for Children and



Young People, who are supposed to be moderating the child safety standards for the state of Victoria. There is an expectation that they are having these conversations, that they expect certain things to be in place, which is for a safety culture. In writing, the policies are there; in practice and action, it is not occurring. You could use that framework as a perfect framework – that model, the child safety standards – to say, ‘Hey, well, we’ve got a right to come in.’ That was put in place so that we could have an entrance in through the other side of the door. We need to use that model. It is in place. A lot of work has been put behind that, and a lot of research went into finding that as a solution.

**Maria ESGUERRA:** No cult member will ever report. Never, ever assume a cult member will ever report. You need external eyes and ears. And in the ones like we heard – the Family, Scientology – they have got their own doctors, they have got everyone within that abusive system. If you think about family violence, you do not go in front of the abusive person and ask the questions. Family violence in a cult is on an industrial scale – for me, it was like 10,000, 15,000 people in my family that were a part of that violence.

**The CHAIR:** I will hand over to my colleagues online. Jackson.

**Jackson TAYLOR:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you both so much for your bravery and for coming in and taking part in these hearings today. My first question is regarding OLN’s support for introducing a new offence recognising group-based coercive control: how could the legal threshold for this offence be defined to capture sustained psychological domination whilst avoiding overreach into legitimate faith or community practices?

**Miriam FRANCIS:** What we would look at is who benefits in this situation. I think that can provide a lot of clarity in terms of how that can be used. We contributed to and do support the submission called *Beyond Belief*, which describes and identifies an array of harms and also identifies the gaps in the current laws. An incredible amount of work and research went into that, and you will be hearing from the primary person who did write that.

In practice we would see that it would make a lot of sense to look at who is benefiting ultimately. I guess what I am trying to say is that in that industrial setting, you can have multiple perpetrators, right? But then who is the ultimate person? It is just like how you would identify, in a criminal organisation or a gang – there are some methods already in place in terms of how you prioritise crime and go after those crimes.

**Maria ESGUERRA:** Who is the kingpin? Who is making the money? I think about myself as a teenager who never went to school, never had medical care myself, watching my baby die of meningitis. The law is such a blunt instrument – like, should I be in jail now? I did not have any access to other information. I think it is really important that we do not criminalise something to the point where you are putting all the victims in jail or they are being harmed. I heard about Zachary, Elizabeth Struhs’s brother, who was only 19 and never had a life outside, being under Brendan Stevens’s control. I was there at the hearing, and the judge said, ‘Please, please get a pre-sentencing report to say if there were any vulnerabilities.’ He was just like ‘No.’ The cult leader was controlling everything and yet they have gone to jail, the children, the people who grew up in that environment. I heard he has been beaten up. He has been put in confinement because, you know, he is proselytising in the prison. This is what I am hearing. I am not 100 per cent sure if it is true, but I resonated with him, and I just say, look, yes, the law is such a blunt object, really. You cannot put the victims in jail. We have talked a lot about it with *Beyond Belief* – it has got to be the people who set up these systems of control and harm, the kingpins and the ones that are benefiting.

**Miriam FRANCIS:** The benefit as well is a clear pathway, an evidentiary pathway – a way to measure, a way to document, a way to see where those things are going to. So yes, ‘Who is it benefiting?’ is the ultimate question there.

**Jackson TAYLOR:** Thank you. And then just finally, OLN proposes a national inquiry and a permanent independent watchdog. What gaps in existing royal commissions or federal- and state-level inquiries make a national inquiry and permanent independent watchdog necessary, and what outcomes should each seek to achieve to bring about sustainable systemic change?

**Maria ESGUERRA:** I would say that the advantage there is being able to have that link between lived experience and government policymaking. And actually that is written into law – that that needs to be occurring. We have that in family violence; it is written into law that lived experiences must be engaged. And I think that is more where we are coming from, because we can see the gaps because of our experiences. And we

want to be able to inform and help and support government to create these safer places, but we are also wanting that to be across a number of professionals with expertise in child safety in particular. We have recommended a few today; we can certainly create more of a list. But that, again, is not just about enforcing from a regulatory position but policymaking that is going to engage people and empower them and educate them and is looking at it as like a multipronged, multifaceted thing. Because with institutional harm it is the entire institution. It is multiple people; it is not a single perpetrator. And so given that that is complex – there is language, there are a lot of things – we can be the cultural translators and assist and support government. That was sort of where we were coming from with that.

**Jackson TAYLOR:** Thank you very much. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Thank you, Cindy.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Thank you. And thank you, ladies, for your amazing contribution today. Look, I have just got a couple of questions about children being born into cults. Your parents, for example: were they recruited or were they too born into cults?

**Miriam FRANCIS:** I am second generation, so my parents chose to – or they joined, I guess – and they were very devout. In fact before I was born they each signed a 1-billion-year contract dedicating not just this lifetime but their future lifetimes for the next 1 billion years. So the level of dedication and devotion and sacrifice that was ahead for them was what I was born into, yes.

**Cindy McLEISH:** And did their parents question it at the time – your grandparents? Do you know anything about whether they were very worried about what was happening? I think, Maria, you talked about education and lack of medical interventions. Was that something your grandparents may have had any insight into?

**Miriam FRANCIS:** Of course we did not grow up with relationships with our grandparents, so we have limited information about that, unfortunately. But I can tell you that in my recent relationships with my uncles, they have told me that their mother used to be quite upset when my parents would go from Sydney to Adelaide – the whole family was from Adelaide – and they would just drop babies off at their doorstep, and then they would never know when they would come and return to them, because my parents were so involved. I mean, my mother would travel to other countries and I would not even know she was not in the country. Like, it is a complete disconnect.

**Cindy McLEISH:** So who was looking after you at those times?

**Miriam FRANCIS:** I was in institutionalised care, with multiple girls in one room sleeping in bunk beds. Or sometimes we would be sleeping on cots or sometimes sleeping on the floor.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Does that still happen, do you think?

**Miriam FRANCIS:** That particular situation, I think not so much since the human trafficking law has come in. For the US, for example – because that is where I was in the year 2000 – it became federal law in the year 2000. I think it came into California state law in 2001, which, again, was when I was there. And Australia as well has developed human trafficking laws. Clearly, you know, a bunch of kids living in triple bunk beds is going to raise some red flags. So I think over time that occurred, yes.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Finally, Maria particularly, you have done a lot of work with child survivors. I imagine that some of them have parents who are still alive. Maybe some of them have left cults, maybe they have not, but do you think any of the parents actually understand, if there are people that have suicided since or that have been incarcerated, the level of trauma that they have inflicted?

**Maria ESGUERRA:** I will answer your first question just because I think it is an important one. My dad, an Australian, was from quite a good family. He ended up joining. You know, he was young, idealistic, wanting to make the world a better place – that is how it all starts. He got Hodgkin's lymphoma and ended up going through this horrible disease shunned and not allowed to get medication. His parent was a doctor, so can you imagine, as a doctor, watching your son who is basically completely – that is what happens in cults. Obviously, families are destroyed. So yes, it is incredibly distressing for people to watch their children fall down, go into these ideological groups and give up their lives – throw away their PhDs, their education. In the US, there was a

whole group called Free COG, which is the Children of God, that went around that. There was kidnapping and they were trying to deprogram, but then there was a bunch of court cases because these people thought they were going to get killed and stuff, so that was even more traumatising, to drag people out.

But yes, having young boys myself in their 20s who are quite vulnerable with like autism and stuff, I cannot even imagine what it would be like to lose a child in that way and to not be able to get through to them at all. Watching Cameron on the Elizabeth Struhs trial, it is absolutely heartbreaking. But do our grandparents know, do you mean, how much harm has happened to their grandkids?

**Cindy McLEISH:** No. I meant did your parents know?

**Miriam FRANCIS:** Do our parents know.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Yes, they have got no idea yet. Some parents may have left and may have seen the trauma. I think we have had some witnesses talk about when their parents eventually left as well.

**Maria ESGUERRA:** I think there is a lot of spiritual bypassing. They are completely disconnected from this world – they are dissociated. There is an actual DSM diagnosis called ‘other specified dissociative disorder’, and that literally talks about political imprisonment, sects and cults. So there is an actual diagnosis of a disorder, and I would say that would relate definitely to our parents. In the case of the Children of God or the Family International now, I think most are not living like they were, not communally. Most are in touch sort of with their kids and stuff, and they are burying their kids. They are paying the ultimate price, so they know, yes.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Thank you very much.

**Miriam FRANCIS:** I would say, for Scientology, I know for my friends and children that grew up into adulthood and then left, their parents have disconnected from them, excommunicated them. The parents are completely not connected to what has happened to the child. The parent just enforces complete denial and refuses to connect with them. The compounding factor is that – this is in my mother’s own words, from what she told me, and I am hearing this from many of the kids that I grew up with, whose parents are telling them the exact same thing – they believe that it is not just this lifetime. The child–parent relationship was fractured so long ago. Being told that your child is not actually your child – it is an adult in a small body – changes that parental–child attachment and development. Bearing in mind they have signed a billion-year contract, the relationship to this child, this body, the ties there – in their mind, they are going to have other relationships in other future –

This is in the 1965 Victorian inquiry, this content about viewing children as trillion-year-old spirits, not actually as children. In the report it says that contributed to their distorted attitude towards sex and young people and children. So this happens in the family unit, this disconnect, where the parent does not recognise that the child is in fact their child. Also, we did not grow up with our parents; we were separated early.

**Maria ESGUERRA:** There are massive attachment issues, like massive, disorganised attachment issues. It is very hard as an adult to start to develop those relationships.

**The CHAIR:** All right. I will hand over to Rachel. Thanks, Rachel.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** Thank you very much for your very brave evidence and your championing of your communities and the people that you are assisting. I am very keen, Miriam and Maria, to understand your perspective on how we can legislate when we have the difficulty that we have identified about reporting. We can legislate as much as we like, but as you clearly identified, with children, and particularly in communities where children are born into them with the resources and support systems around them – the doctors, the teachers, the dentists are all part of the cult – how do you report? What can we do to protect children and identify issues? Legislation is one thing, but when you have got a very close-knit group like Children of God or the Family, then it seems very difficult to be able to overcome that closed community.

**Miriam FRANCIS:** Thank you for your question. What I really want to avoid is trying to reinvent the wheel. We had the massive Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. It was an incredible amount of resources and witness reporting that really backed this pathway of using the child safety standards, and this is really, really important. This is the pathway through that, what you are describing there.

In terms of children, there needs to be someone looking in, checking in, having a look. It does not need that heavy-handed approach. In policy they are supposed to create a child safety culture, and this is supposed to be in institutions. The problem that the royal commission was trying to address is the abuse of children within an institution. This is a solution that they have put forward using experts, so we can use the available framework that is there. Because one of those points – I think it is number 2 for Victoria, because the different states have them in a different order – and certainly the national principles call for informing children of their rights. Victoria takes it one step forward, on paper, at least, and says ‘empower children’ by their rights. So that is really important. Well, how do we do that? Are we expecting the institutions to self-govern? Well, that was the problem in the first place. That was the problem that the royal commission was trying to solve. And we had so many witnesses that bared their hearts and souls for that commission, an incredible amount – you know, it was a national thing. It was monumental. This is the solution for opening that door. Does that answer the question?

**Maria ESGUERRA:** I have got a bit of an answer to that as well. I just think it is professional curiosity. I mean, these children do leave the compounds or the houses or whatever. And I just think about all the scenarios that we were in growing up, you know – out on the street, proselytising, giving out tracts, asking for money. We were trafficked on the street, travelling overseas by ourselves when we were 14, 15 years old. There were just so many times that people around – in airports – could say, ‘That’s wrong. That’s weird. That’s strange.’ Someone walking into Centrelink – I have a friend; she grew up overseas. Australian – that is her only citizenship. Weird accents – we have all got strange accents. ‘Cultese’ we call it. There are just a lot of things that you can pick up on: someone walking into school for the first time and they do not exist. Like, where did this kid come from? And walking into Centrelink and, like, ‘We’ve never seen a citizenship document like this.’ It is just about every time they are out in the community people looking out. And the more we can actually do these public campaigns, the more people are going to start seeing the signs of, really, child trafficking and abuse and closed communities.

I think that is so, so important – and not just looking at this alternative lifestyle facade and being, like, curious about it but actually realising there are signs of abuse and coercive control. You will see it in their body language. And each cult has a different culture – if you see someone that just comes from a completely different culture and it just does not make a lot of sense, their stories and stuff, even being really socially weird and awkward. We were talking last night after a glass of wine about all those weird things that we did when we left – because you are just so unsocialised – and we were like, we just did so many weird things that put us at a huge amount of risk. Over 47 per cent went straight into domestic violence; that was common. So many people have told me they were raped as well, right after they left, because you do not have any boundaries or protection, no family, no knowledge of the real world. So yes, it is just looking out and sort of seeing it.

I think it is going to be a helpful person that takes that person under their wing, and it is going to be the change. And that is why we actually want to go into these communities – like, outreach – and say, ‘If you want to keep these kids, that’s fine. But if they want to leave, here is a pamphlet. You need to make sure that they come to us, and we will support them in their transition.’ It is like a refugee – we have more funding going into people leaving jail, you know, all sorts of things. But these kids are coming out from just being worked to the bone their whole life, exploited, having no family and protection, and then they are just thrown out to the wolves, into the world, with no knowledge of how to exist.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** Maria, may I ask you one small question? You mentioned all of these young children being put out to work. You mentioned that you were working at the age of two. Can you just expand on that a little bit, please? What did they do to you to make you employable at two?

**Maria ESGUERRA:** Yes. It is a weird comment, isn’t it? Well, the Children of God – you can probably look it up; there are tons of videos. We were taught how to act and sing. I moved to the Philippines when I was one, with my family, and at that point we were there on our own, with no parents whatsoever in these massive communes. We were out singing. I was a sweet little blonde kid being, like, squeezed all the time. They were giving lots of money to us. There were sexual videos being made. I do not want to go into it, but there was every form of exploitation of children making money for the cult. Everything was about us being kind of martyred or sacrificed like the lamb in the Abraham story – not to bring in religion; we do not want to bring religion at all into this. But yes, that is just kind of a thing that people think, ‘I need to sacrifice.’ I know parents that have given their children to be raped, to the guru or to the leaders, as a sacrifice. I think that is our biggest thing. You cannot sacrifice your children as martyrs for your ideological beliefs. You just can’t.

**Miriam FRANCIS:** You cannot own another human being, and it does not matter the age of that body, that person or that child. It does not matter their age; you cannot own them and they cannot be just collateral damage of participation in things that are not safe for children. Placing them there places them at risk.

Going back to addressing the entry into an institution, the rule is very clear that any organisation which provides services to children is an organisation that has to be governed by child safety standards and create a child safety culture. It empowers them by their rights. So it really is the pathway into the institution. If there are children inside there, then the government has a right to represent the children, to empower them by their rights and to represent them and their safety, and it has an entry way in there. I mean, it could even be as simple as – if someone is a specialist in safeguarding children, why can't they go and sit in at a Sunday service or a Jehovah's Witnesses meeting and say, 'Let's have a look at your materials. Okay, let's open this book.'

**Maria ESGUERRA:** Dive deeper, yes. I know when we were raided that there were trunks of material that was taken. It was sexually explicit material. It was grooming material that we were looking at. I have put some in the submission. I am sorry you had to see that, but I did want to show the graphic nature of the material we were seeing our whole lives, and of course there were lots of things in real life that we were seeing and being exposed to.

Yes, you have got to dive deeper. Cults are so good at having that facade of the shiny happy people. That is another thing with a cult survivor; you might see them smiling and maybe they are glassy eyed – 'You just need Jesus.' Just because someone is smiling, the kids do not have dirt on their face and dad does not have a beer in hand – that does not necessarily mean abuse. Abuse can mean extreme authoritarian control and kids who are incredibly well behaved and silent and maybe even dissociated. It is very common. Actually, the number one symptom that most people report is dissociation, because of these crazy exorcisms, the speaking in tongues and the auditing. With these things that kids are exposed to, your mind just goes into this state, and that is how you survive, really.

**Miriam FRANCIS:** For example, in supermarkets we do not allow pornographic material to be available. There are only certain places where that is allowed to be sold. So why is this happening inside of these closed groups where no-one can intervene and no-one can see what is happening? This kind of material is being supplied to children in a sustained way. For example, talking about child safety and child protection, in the Jehovah's Witnesses – and again, I am going to submit a supplementary submission – since the royal commission, how they have reformed is to require the elders to have a working with children check. But the elders are also the ones that are doing these judicial committees where they are sitting across from children and asking them how they touch themselves. They want to know explicit details: 'What did you do? Where did you put your hand? How long did you do it for?' For example, if a child or a young person had a sexual interaction with somebody of their own age, they want to discover who was at fault, who was the sinful one, so they will ask in great detail: 'Who kissed who? When did it start? How did you do it? Where did you put your hand? Where did they put their hand? Then what did you do? And did you like it?' This is three men with working with children check cards. It is a ticket to children. Then everyone steps back and goes, 'Oh, well, if they've got that ticket.' It is like, 'Hang on, can't you just have a look at what they're actually doing?'

**Maria ESGUERRA:** That is why you have to look at the practices. It is so, so important.

**Miriam FRANCIS:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** I will hand over to Christine for one last question. Chris?

**Chris COUZENS:** Thank you both so much for your contribution. We really appreciate it. You argue that religious freedom cannot override a child's right to safety and education. How should policymakers balance these competing rights, and are there any examples, Australia or internationally, where the Olive Leaf Network view is that this balance has not been struck effectively?

**Miriam FRANCIS:** Okay. There is no competition there, in my opinion. In the law, the best interest of the child is the primary consideration. That is the go-to. There is no competition there. It is the primary consideration. That means that it is above that religious freedom, because we have a role in ensuring their safety and protection, wellbeing and healthy development. I do not see those as conflicting freedoms and rights, the law and the set of rights. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is very clear in how it is prioritised.

**Maria ESGUERRA:** And religious right is an individual right. Hearing it talked about as a group right does not make sense to me. It is not a group's right to have people as their slaves for life. The child also has that individual right. If they do not want to go to the meeting, then they have got the right to say, 'I don't want to. I don't want to sit there for 5 hours learning about death and damnation' – or whatever. I think that is important. But there was a case – I think we brought it up in our Olive Leaf Network – where a parent was forcing their child to proselytise on the streets and hand out pamphlets, and they were told that that was not okay.

**Miriam FRANCIS:** This was in the US Supreme Court. I think it was 1949. It was a Jehovah's Witness case. It is *Prince v Massachusetts*. It was about a caregiver who was on the streets with her niece and her own children where they were distributing the *Watchtower*. The state convicted Prince of child labour. She appealed to the US Supreme Court, and her argument was that religious freedom trumps the state's enforcement of protections of the child. The US Supreme Court ruled that, no, that is not the case, the state has a right to enforce restrictions which are for the protection of the child. They said in the statement that a parent does not have the right to martyr their child, and the child must wait until they are of an age, have reached adulthood, where they can make that decision for themselves. It is not the parent's right to cause a child to suffer or to be harmed. A child cannot be made a martyr.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We are going to have to conclude today's hearing here. Before we do so, was there anything else that you wanted to add?

**Maria ESGUERRA:** There is. There is a very special poem. I might not get through it. It is written by Cheryl Bawtinheimer. She is a child survivor of the Exclusive Brethren.

I want to unzip my body  
right here,  
right now  
in front of you,  
in front of the jury,  
in front of every person who ever asked:  
"Are you sure it happened?"  
"Why didn't you say something sooner?"  
"Do you have any proof?"

No.  
I don't have proof.  
I have a body that remembers every inch of those hands.  
I have skin that flinches  
when the air shifts just right.  
I have a ribcage that tightens  
like it still knows the weight of silence.

If you want proof  
let me unzip my body.

Let me peel back the flesh,  
reveal the places they touched  
before I even had words  
for what they were stealing.  
Let me show you the ache  
that lodged itself between my legs  
before I knew how to say stop.

I will show you the truth  
screaming in my nervous system,  
the courtroom carved  
into every tendon,  
every tremor.

Don't ask for tidy stories.  
Don't ask for police reports  
from a time I couldn't spell my own name.

Ask my hips why they lock up in the dark.  
Ask my stomach why it turns  
when I hear footsteps behind me

Or change jingling in a pocket.  
Ask my body.  
It kept the minutes  
when no one else would.

This isn't about believing me anymore.  
It's about believing in justice  
justice that doesn't wait for a perfect victim  
or a timestamped photo.  
It's about holding children  
like sacred fire  
too precious to risk,  
too human to doubt,  
too valuable to silence.

If I unzip my body,  
let it spill every unspoken truth  
then zip it back up  
with steel thread and fire  
it's not to prove myself.  
It's not for your belief.  
It's for the ones still silent.  
For the ones still hoping someone will listen.  
For the justice we still haven't seen.  
For the children  
who should never have to unzip theirs  
just to be protected.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Maria and Mirriam, for appearing before the committee today and for your powerful contribution to this inquiry. We appreciate the time and effort that you have taken to prepare your evidence and your written submission, and we acknowledge the significance of your testimony. You will be provided with a proof version of today's transcript to check, and verified transcripts will be published on the committee's website.

We will take a short break before we resume for our next witness. I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**