

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne – Monday 1 December 2025

MEMBERS

Ella George – Chair

Cindy McLeish

Annabelle Cleeland – Deputy Chair

Jackson Taylor

Chris Couzens

Rachel Westaway

John Lister

WITNESS

Mary Hughes.

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's Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups.

I begin today 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 am joined today by my colleagues Cindy McLeish, the Member for Eildon; Annabelle Cleeland, Deputy Chair and Member for Euroa; Christine Couzens, Member for Geelong; and Jackson Taylor, Member for Bayswater. John Lister, the Member for Werribee, will be joining 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.

Today the Committee is hearing its eighth day of public hearings for this inquiry. 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 Mary Hughes. I thank Mary for her 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, and once again, I welcome Mary Hughes. Mary, I invite you to make an opening statement.

Mary HUGHES: Thank you very much, and good afternoon to everyone. Thank you indeed for this opportunity to share my life with you. I am only now getting to know myself as Mary and trusting her as I could not at the most naive, fragile and vulnerable stage of my life.

When I was finishing Catholic boarding school at sixteen, over sixty years ago, I made a devout, idealistic and uninformed decision and surrendered my life to certainty, to faith, to protection in a safe place. I was frightened in anticipating life alone in an adult world. I vowed obedience, poverty and chastity to a prioress, to a mother figure, to a human representative of God who, I was assured, had given me this special vocation promoted by the Archdiocese of Melbourne. I innocently trusted; I had no reason not to. The prioress and her followers aspired to greatness and to perfection. The commitment was a sure way to heaven. We were constantly reminded that we were sinners. By being obedient, we would be saved, and we would save others from hell through our prayers. That was our work. Manipulation of me was possible because of my insecurity, my self-doubt and low self-esteem.

The certainty of the tradition and the authority of the institution gave me confidence to surrender. The process of formation, initiation and induction training deadened my brain, disengaged me from myself, my family, friends and from the real world and introduced me to a state of constant anxiety to perform and to keep awake amid the exhaustion of the day's routine. My family, my friends and the real world were completely cut off, except under strict supervision – even to see my family. Formation justified surrender in a system of control that denied and prevented change, personal growth and maturity. The formation sucked the spirit out of my broken self and deadened my capacity to think and to question and to reason.

Why did I stay? At sixteen, I was afraid and insecure, with no self-awareness at that age. I was not developed as an adult so as to be in a position to make an informed decision. I implicitly trusted Catholic doctrine and ritual as the prioress mother figure interpreted it on behalf of a god that she made in her own image with unchallenged authority. I could not leave. I did not know another life. More service and less concern about self were the means of salvation. There was no outside world for me; I was physically enclosed within high walls and with absolute control. I was constantly reminded that the world was wicked. People came to the monastery – to us – for solace. Very few people came to share their joy in a beautiful, creative, wonderful, engaging world. All I understood was that I was suffering in my life, which was validated to save souls and to obtain blessings and to save you all from hell. This was our special role.

My decision to leave: I believed that the way of life practised in the monastery at Kew was the Carmelite way until in the last three to four years I visited other monasteries that had evolved as part of the global Carmelite order. It was after meeting others with the same values as mine that I realised the perversion of the isolated leadership at Kew. I was not permitted to discuss my experiences when I returned to Kew. Kew has not effectively been governed since about 1950. It is completely separate from the world, the wider Carmelite order and the central governing body, which is in Rome, and it has not had proper oversight by the archdiocese.

My care since leaving Kew: now, with the support of family, with true, faithful friends and the help of professional therapists Raphael Aron and Peter Mulder, I am engaging with the reality of living responsively in this real world and of coping with my complex, very fragile self in the very best company of fragile brothers and sisters who live responsibly with kindness and goodness as best they can in a real world.

Perfection, power, privilege and judgement do not define me now. In this beautiful, precious life of genuine relationships on this fragile planet, sharing my experience is assisting me enormously in forgiveness. To nurture my growth as Mary, I am now growing in trust, with love and compassion for myself and others with an enormous burden of grief.

I understand that you have read my submission and the additional recently submitted material, and I welcome any questions that you may have.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mary. On behalf of the Committee can I say thank you for your very powerful opening statement. Once again, we are truly grateful that you have shared your experiences with us and that you are appearing before the Committee today. Mary, I would like to ask you a couple of questions about exiting the organisation, if that is all right. From your perspective, what were the biggest challenges you faced when you were leaving?

Mary HUGHES: It was walking away from a whole community I had lived with for sixty years. It was the awareness that I was going out completely unsupported, except for my dear brother and his family and some very supportive friends who gave me the courage to act on what my gut had known many years earlier but I had no means of acting upon.

The CHAIR: Are there other things that could have supported you or made the exit from the community easier for you?

Mary HUGHES: There was a continuing awareness of being retraumatised by what was not there to help me. I had given my life for sixty years. The only law that I was familiar with was canon law. We heard about it regularly; the constitutions and rule were read regularly. I found that canon law did not support me as an individual. It had nothing to secure for me as an individual. It was meant to, if it was properly interpreted and executed with integrity and morality. Canon law is there to protect the individual, but in reality it protects the institution. That was a retraumatising experience because I believed it was the be-all and end-all. There were no structures in place to provide for anyone who left.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mary. I will hand over to Annabelle.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Thank you, Mary. We are very appreciative of your courage today, by the way. I am kind of interested to understand any potential financial control or influence that the community had over you. During your fifty-nine, sixty years in the group were you paid for work, and did you receive any money? And likewise, did you contribute financially to the society?

Mary HUGHES: I contributed in my involvement with producing Monastique skincare and perfumes for many, many years. I was never privy to any of the outcomes – the yearly, what the sales were or any of that. Everything to do with finances was completely under the prioress's control, and everything was compartmentalised so that nobody knew anything of what other areas did. I did a lot of illuminated artwork for manuscripts for presentations. Everything was done for the prioress. She disposed of whatever your work was as she wished. Personally, I got no payment for anything. No money was kept on my person; it was all handed in, and if I had to get a taxi, I had to ask for the taxi money and return the receipt with the change before nightfall that day. I had no access to money, nor to my passport. We did not have any free access or use, and neither did we receive payment for anything. Food and lodging – that was the reward.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Wow. And a lot of labour that was unpaid?

Mary HUGHES: A tremendous lot of labour – constant, repetitive. You always could be redirected and have your own work interrupted if the prioress needed anything. It was very hard work.

Annabelle CLEELAND: You mentioned instances where you were appointed to roles like director without being informed or asked for consent. Can you just explain what that experience was, what the responsibilities were and why you believe your name was used without any oversight of those true needs around the role?

Mary HUGHES: I was made a director, and the ACNC had no documentation of me signing that. I was asked to do it. I lived under obedience. That is no excuse for my participation in the cloned sort of behaviour that I operated because I knew nothing better. I was not educated. I was not informed of the responsibility of those roles. It was part of your obedience and response to obedience that was also instrumental in the degree of loyalty with which you were trusted in community. But I do believe that for all those roles – for mine for a period as formatter of younger sisters, for my leadership for 10 years of the community in Wagga – I had no understanding, capacity, training or professional experience for any of those roles, and particularly not for being appointed as bursar. When I tried to get informed and became aware of the grave responsibility of these duties, that was not welcomed, and my voice, which was beginning to get strong with absolute alarm at that point in time, was not listened to. I was gaslighted and put down, humiliated. It was not an ideal setting at all, and it was governed by complacency and by tradition, rather than responsibility in positions.

Annabelle CLEELAND: I have a couple more questions, but I will share just because of time, and if there is time at the end, I will ask.

The CHAIR: Christine.

Chris COUZENS: Thank you, Mary, for your time today – we really appreciate it – and for your submission and sharing your experience with us. It is so valuable to hear from you today. What types of education or awareness would help prevent others from being drawn into harmful and deceptive groups? Have you got any views on that?

Mary HUGHES: Never let them in, I would say, before they are twenty-five or older. Younger than that – this is part of the fault of the recruiting. I mean, at sixteen, leaving school, it is a time of transition and uncertainty and a lot of fear, and faith, whatever religion you are part of, particularly the Catholic religion, offers certainty. It is a complete contradiction. Faith is not about certainty; certainty comes with growth and living. If you have got certainty, you are hiding and you are not developing.

Education is a very big point, and an awareness that just because a religious institution has a tremendous lot of credibility in society – do not take it for granted, and whatever you do, question your faith, doubt your faith, ask endless questions. I did not ask questions, and in fact I was told that there was not much point because really you have got to come and live the life to experience it. Once you are in there at that vulnerable age, in those extremely isolated conditions, with an overload of silence and completely unable to relate to your fellow young people who are also there, you have no means of discussion, of discerning. All the input is one way, and you are there to be taught by the experts who know, with a tradition which has produced such great saints.

Chris COUZENS: Are there any red flags you can identify that would help authorities, whether it is teachers or doctors or whatever, to identify someone who is under coercive control, from your experience?

Mary HUGHES: My first question now would be: does that religion that you are thinking of going into do human rights? Does it do employment rights, volunteer rights? Is this community or congregation responsible to state government for your protection? That was the huge shocker to me – that I had dedicated my life to an institution that was run by one person that took me right out of the protection of human rights, of human liberty, of privacy and of help, psychiatric help. There was nothing private. Everyone had to report, whether they were in charge of health, transport, buying a new pair of sandals or whatever. Everybody had to account for the prioress. Everything that came in had to be oversighted by the prioress. Your mail was all opened; parcels were opened. There was no privacy. And until way after I entered – thirty years later – you could not have personal memorabilia in your room. It was barren; it was streamlined. There was an enormous sensory deprivation. For so many decades you were completely cut off from music, from the possibility of going for a walk, even though your doctor advised it: 'No, you don't go outside the property.' I was brought to task six months before I left for walking down to the dentist. My doctor had recommended walking, but you can only walk around in circles for so long.

Living under religious obedience is an enormous giveaway. It is a surrender. I did not realise that in being so obedient I had stunted my growth. I had deprived my family – my parents, my two sisters, who are deceased, all my aunts and uncles – of knowing me, and I was deprived of being involved in their lives. And my schoolfriends: initially, only your immediate family could come, and that was with a person with me on the other side of an iron grille – an iron grille which you could put two fingers through.

Chris COUZENS: So there was no direct contact?

Mary HUGHES: There was no possibility of embrace. When my mother first saw me when I entered behind that grille, she burst into tears. I had never seen her cry, and it was a shocking awakening to me of the radical decision that I had made. But I was determined to see it out, because I made that decision. But I did not think. I did not realise the drastic implications it had for my parents. And with particularly my father's deep Catholic faith, they considered it a blessing to have their daughter in religious life. But they did not have a clue – I hope they did not have a clue – of how dehumanising it was for me.

Chris COUZENS: Thank you very much, Mary, for that. I appreciate it.

The CHAIR: Cindy.

Cindy McLEISH: Thank you, Mary. Thank you so much for your submission and for coming today. How did you find the order? And the way you found it – was that how other people found it, as in choosing that was where they wanted to go?

Mary HUGHES: I read the autobiography of St Thérèse of Lisieux, a young French Carmelite. She died at twenty-four, and in 1925 she was canonised a saint. The pope at the time proclaimed her the greatest saint in modern times, and in fact she anticipated the Vatican Council by decades. It was her spirit – she was very young when she entered, younger than I was. She struggled at school – coping with school, coping with transitions, coping with the death of her mother. She was a very fragile girl. She entered into the Carmel, and she became this woman who is now known all over the world. I had like aspirations, as a very aspirational young person, to make something of my life, and if I could do it the way she did, by engaging with love in the heart of the human body, which pumps its energy through all the organs so that they function – that was her image, taken from St Paul – then what a valuable life, what an engagement and help with humanity. But I completely stuffed up when I identified wanting to be like her with the need to engage and be within the order that she was in.

Cindy McLEISH: Do other people come to the order the same way as you?

Mary HUGHES: Yes. They still do.

Cindy McLEISH: They still do – okay.

Mary HUGHES: And the number that have entered since – and indeed it was the main question that was asked to me when I appeared in my college uniform: 'Have you read the life of St Thérèse?' And of course I had. My father gave it to me when I was about 13. They said, 'Well, this is what our life is all about.'

Cindy McLEISH: So everybody there lived the same way you lived?

Mary HUGHES: Yes.

Cindy McLEISH: And many of them are still there living life like that at the moment?

Mary HUGHES: Many have left.

Cindy McLEISH: That was my next question.

Mary HUGHES: Many have left, and in very, very sad circumstances, with no precedent of structure for leaving except on the whim of the prioress.

Cindy McLEISH: And no superannuation to help you out at all? Nothing?

Mary HUGHES: Absolutely nothing. If you had received a bequest, if you came with a dowry, that money could be and should be and is returned to you – if you brought a dowry. I did not. I was not asked for one. But my parents were asked for the child endowment money that used to come till you were eighteen in those days. The money that was bequeathed to you could be and should be returned to you, but without interest.

Cindy McLEISH: And if somebody died and left you an inheritance, would that be held for you, if you inherited?

Mary HUGHES: If it was held by the prioress as my inheritance, it should come back to me. I did not have personal use of it at all. It should be returned to me minus the interest, and any other payment for my support is up to the discernment of the prioress with Gospel charity.

Cindy McLEISH: Is she still alive?

Mary HUGHES: Yes.

Cindy McLEISH: And still –

Mary HUGHES: There have been four prioresses.

Cindy McLEISH: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. John.

John LISTER: Thank you. Thank you, Mary, for coming to appear before the inquiry. I am curious about your role that you mentioned as formatter of younger sisters. What did that entail? What were some of the responsibilities?

Mary HUGHES: I continued the same formation that I received, and it was expected to be continued to maintain the tradition. It was all theological. It was one-sided. I spent my earliest years in formation sound asleep, because there was no discussion. It was all being read and it was theological. It was about the saints of the order, the historical tradition and development of the order and the religious implications of taking vows – all theoretical.

John LISTER: It is safe to say that since the Second Vatican Council a lot has changed in the church, particularly in Australia. Do you think that the OCDM has resisted that change?

Mary HUGHES: The changes that I experienced over the years – those very heavy grills were taken out of the church and out of one of the parlours in about 1968. There is still a parlour there that maintains that grill. Externals were changed. The habit was adapted. There were curtains put on the windows and a mat on the wooden floor. External things were changed, and they were wonderful. We appreciated it no end to have a bread-and-butter plate in the refectory and then to go into a different setting of a refectory where we were not around the four walls. We had round tables, and we eventually had a tablecloth and proper settings. A lot of externals changed, but the substance of the tradition and the authority never changed.

John LISTER: It did not necessarily change that mission as well, the work that you were doing as part of it externally, like the mission with other people.

Mary HUGHES: The mission to other people was the mission of prayer, which is undefinable in society, and that is why we are not tax deductible for donations. But because the tradition was so entrenched and because the maintenance of that huge structure became so prioritised, the sisters living in it, their religious duties, their time for contemplation, their time for reading and their time for relaxation, holidays, went out of the scene. We were struggling to have seven days for a retreat, and during that retreat the priest giving the retreat had to be cared for. With the sisters' service to maintain the physicality of that place and its difficulties with age, infirmities and structural problems, the core of the life went into daily work and service to keep it going.

John LISTER: Thank you. Thank you for that insight. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Jackson.

Jackson TAYLOR: Thank you, Chair, and thank you very much, Mary, for coming along today, for your time, for your courage to share your submission and for answering our questions. The question I have is: what do you think the Victorian government should prioritise to help support people leaving or attempting to leave harmful groups?

Mary HUGHES: I think the basic need, a primary need for those who leave, is to have financial assistance – some support, somewhere to go. I mean, I am blessed having a family to welcome me; a lot of sisters have never had that, and a lot of priests have never had that. They are they are sent out with the clothes that they have on their back – whatever they brought in – and they, like me, are totally ill equipped to deal with the government requirements of Centrelink, of living in town, in the real world, as an individual person, completely cut off from a community and from all the provisions that were provided for you in community that prevented you from growing with responsibility. The great need that I had, and that was immediately obvious to the first doctor I saw, was for psychiatric help. My mind was so bent; my ability to think – I was so incapacitated I would have a panic attack sorting out which tram to get. I would take 2½ hours to visit Raphael Aron, when it takes a half an hour; I was so struggling to cope with the tram system.

The simplest things – I could not put a sentence together when I first left. My memory was shot. I could not speak other than the language that I was so accustomed to for sixty years, and it was quoting scripture. It was from another planet. I had lived on a parallel planet that took away my growth and my humanity and my development as an intelligent person. The struggle to trust yourself coming out of this situation is enormous because your self-esteem has been squashed from very, very early on – you are just diminished by the judgement and also by the overload that you have from all that theological training and that particular uneducated interpretation of scripture and the way it was used to validate everything. I saw myself as a traitor to the whole system, because you were constantly being judged on your level of loyalty. The catalyst for me leaving was, after sixty years, to be accused by the prioress of having an evil spirit, which meant my life meant absolutely nothing.

And physically as a human being I was not much either. Anyone who leaves these institutions needs that help to enable them to function. I have been so blessed in having friends who believed in me when I could not believe in myself, but I could never have left the situation unless I had lived outside of Kew for 10 years and engaged with real people who saw me as I was. They are here with me today, as you are. I am so blessed because of this friendship and support to be able to speak with you as no-one else has been able to speak to you in these circumstances, to present their desperate need, to have the state law protecting everybody with equality.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mary.

Jackson TAYLOR: Thank you, Mary.

The CHAIR: Mary, that concludes our questions. But before we conclude the hearing, would you like to make a concluding statement?

Mary HUGHES: I would. Thank you for that opportunity, because I struggle to express things personally. To be clear about my recruitment in OCDM and, in my view, their ongoing recruitment of faith-dependent

people for financial support and donation of goods in kind, Jesus warned his world two-thousand years ago about saying one thing and acting another way. He was crucified for calling it out as it was.

Kew relied, and continues to rely, on the credibility of the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne and its archbishops: Daniel Mannix, Justin Simonds, James Knox, Frank Little, George Pell, Denis Hart and Peter Comensoli. Kew relied, and still relies, on the service of Jesuits, Dominicans, Franciscans, Cistercians and others – other priests and others in the Catholic community. Kew relied, and still relies, on the credibility of the name Carmelite without the ecclesiastic or governance links that this name implies. Kew relied, and still relies, on the promotion of St Thérèse, the French Carmelite, for recruitment. The naming of the Kew site, its church, as her national shrine is a self-bestowed status. Kew relied, and continues to rely, on total control by the prioress and her followers. She is effectively accountable to no-one. There is no governance, and there are no checks or balances, no responsibility.

Kew relies on its charitable status under the ACNC. I listened to and read the ACNC submission, and from my experience it is weak and not taken seriously. The differences in reporting for religious bodies leads to complacency. Kew relies on its essential goodness as a religion to be exceptional in its legal benefits and tax responsibilities. In my experience, the exceptional treatment is unwarranted as it promotes inequality, which is not reflected in societal standards today.

Kew is no more noble than the Smith Family or the Fred Hollows Foundation, for example. Nothing justifies complacency in the face of societal standards. My experience is that the leadership controls with ultimate power, judgement and privilege removed from humanity and from reality. The leadership preaches unity yet creates divide. It preaches love and promotes fear. Gods are interpreted to suit their own purpose and demand sacrifice of the prioress's followers. The tradition promoted position rather than relationship. Quoting Frank Brennan, a lawyer and Jesuit priest:

Acknowledge that state law must assist the church to transparency. It cannot do it from within itself.

I have come as one, but I speak for many who have not experienced the freedom, equality and respect of civil law governance and its checks and balances. As society progresses, I speak for those deprived of the protection of basic human rights, workplace safety and dispute resolutions on behalf of those who have lived within and been left as twisted, broken shadows of the good people who could have gifted and enriched the world. We must unite to evolve into a better society to ensure that fairness is achieved now, in our time and for the future.

In conclusion, to answer your question, my urgent request is for legislation to retrospectively criminalise coercive behaviour, to ensure that funding for counselling is part of the solution, to take into account the national standards for volunteer involvement as part of the solution and, as many religions have already achieved, to provide standards of remuneration which provide for real cost. I commend the Parliament and the Committee for your invaluable work in helping to bring this about, and I also include all your valuable support team. Thank you very much, each and all.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mary. Thank you very much for appearing before the Committee today and for your contribution to this incredibly important inquiry. The Committee greatly appreciates the time and effort taken to prepare your evidence, and we acknowledge the significance of your testimony today.

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. Once again, thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.