

**INQUIRY INTO THE RECRUITMENT METHODS AND IMPACTS OF
CULTS AND ORGANISED FRINGE GROUPS**

Organisation: Australian Christian Lobby

Date Received: 31 July 2025

Committee Secretary
The Legislative Assembly Legal and Social
Issues Committee
Parliament of Victoria

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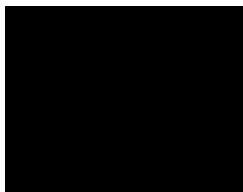
Dear Committee Secretary,

The Australian Christian Lobby ('ACL') is grateful for the opportunity to provide this submission to the [Inquiry](#) into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups ('Inquiry').

This submission is approved at ACL's national organisation level.

Thank you for giving our submission your careful consideration.

Yours faithfully,



Jasmine Yuen
Victorian Director, ACL



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

AUSTRALIAN CHRISTIAN LOBBY

About Australian Christian Lobby

The vision of the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) is to see Christian principles and ethics influencing the way we are governed, do business, and relate to each other as a community. ACL seeks to see a compassionate, just and moral society through having the public contributions of the Christian faith reflected in the political life of the nation.

With around 250,000 supporters, ACL facilitates professional engagement and dialogue between the Christian constituency and government, allowing the Voice of Christians to be heard in the public square. ACL is neither party-partisan nor denominationally aligned. ACL representatives bring a Christian perspective to policy makers in Federal, State and Territory Parliaments.

acl.org.au

Executive Summary

The Australian Christian Lobby ('ACL') recognises the concern about cults and organised fringe groups ('OFGs') which underlies this Inquiry, and the potential harms that certain groups could cause within society. As such, the ACL is generally supportive of this Inquiry. It is encouraging that the Victorian Government is aware of this potential issue, and we thank the Committee for its investigations.

However, a delicate approach is required in this context. **It is vitally important that any reform upholds Victorians' rights such as freedoms of religion, association and expression, which are protected both internationally and domestically and can only be limited in specific circumstances.**

We are also concerned about the potential for the misinterpretation of mainstream religious doctrines, Biblical teaching and church practices as 'cult-like', including because the Inquiry is considering a wide range of potentially 'cult-like' behaviours. Reform targeting cults and OFGs could also inadvertently interfere with mainstream churches and their practices, as cults and OFGs often have pseudo-Christian beliefs and somewhat similar practices. As such, we urge the Committee to develop a clear definition of cults, which identifies the core problem this inquiry is seeking to address, as well as being very cautious to ensure that any reforms do not impact mainstream churches or their practices in any way.

Existing laws already prohibit the types of clearly unlawful activities that are commonly associated with cults and OFGs. However, there may be a need for greater enforcement of these existing laws. Any push to introduce new religious (or even broader) coercive control laws should be strongly resisted, as religious and other settings are very different to domestic contexts and crafting such laws is likely to be fraught with risks and grey areas. **As such, the ACL does *not* support the introduction of any new legislation in response to this Inquiry, including to directly (or indirectly) prohibit the operation of cults or OFGs, or any new coercive control laws. However, we would potentially support other policy measures, e.g. to increase community education about the potential harms of extreme cults or to establish a new reporting or support body to assist people who consider they are at risk of some harm.**

Reasons for ACL being generally supportive of this Inquiry:

1. The ACL recognises the reason for concern about cults and OFGs operating in Australia. Certain groups could potentially cause harms to individuals, families and/or the broader community.
2. We also understand from media reports and our engagement with local church leaders that cult-like groups are active in Victoria and recruiting members, including from mainstream churches. For example, a Chinese group known as 'Eastern Lightning' or 'Church of Almighty God' (**EL**), associated with murder/fatal violence, extortion, seduction, beatings, harassment and kidnapping in China, is reported by local church leaders to be operating in Australia.¹ We are also aware of reports that a South Korean group known as 'Shincheonji Church of Jesus' (**SCJ**) is active in Melbourne, recruiting young people and university students into 'toxic' and 'abusive' relationships and behaviours.²
3. While we do not have direct experience with or detailed insights into such groups, we are quite concerned by such reports. These groups have names that suggest some affinity to mainstream Christianity, but it seems that they may in practice inflict harms on their members and/or other people which conflicts entirely with the message and aims of Christianity. We are concerned about

the physical, emotional and spiritual harms which such groups may cause to people, and also the apparent distortion of mainstream Christian beliefs which such groups may perpetuate.

4. We also encourage the Committee to consider other groups in our society today that have elements of coercive behaviour, rather than focussing on certain Christian groups. This includes extreme elements of other mainstream religions, such as Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, where coercive practices may also exist. The media has also highlighted extreme, abusive and coercive practices within the CFMEU, especially in Victoria. Similarly, the Australian Greens Party co-founder, Drew Hutton, has also labelled his party authoritarian and cult-like. The emotional, psychological and even physical harms inflicted by these groups on their members are as disturbing as the pseudo-Christian groups, thus should also be included in this inquiry.
5. For such reasons, the ACL is generally supportive of this Inquiry. We hope that it provides a practical means for the Government to better understand any risk of harms from cults and OFGs. However, for the reasons below, we urge the Committee to take a very cautious approach to any reform.

Reasons for ACL urging a very cautious approach to any reform:

Freedoms of religion, association and expression must be upheld and not inappropriately limited

6. While it is important to protect people from any harms associated with cults and OFGs, any reform must be very carefully considered. A delicate approach is especially required to ensure that important rights such as freedoms of religion, association and expression are appropriately upheld.
7. In this regard, the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* ('ICCPR')³ is a major human rights instrument to which Australia has agreed to be bound.⁴ It broadly protects freedoms of religion, association and expression and provides that they may only be limited in specific circumstances.
8. The *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Vic)⁵ ('*Charter*') also similarly protects such rights (and does not otherwise abrogate or limit the rights or freedoms arising under international law which are not included or are only partly included in it⁶). Under the *Charter*, a right may be subject under law "only to such reasonable limits as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society based on human dignity, equality and freedom", and taking into account all relevant factors (including the nature of the right; the importance of the purpose of and the nature and extent of the limitation; the relationship between the limitation and its purpose; and any less restrictive means reasonably available to achieve the purpose that the limitation seeks to achieve).⁷

Freedom of thought, conscience and religion:

9. The *ICCPR* protects the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including to have or adopt a religion or belief, and, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest it in worship, observance, practice and teaching. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair freedom to have or adopt a religion or belief of choice. Freedom to manifest religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations prescribed by law and necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.⁸
10. Essentially, this protects the right of all to think freely, entertain ideas and hold positions based on conscientious, religious or other beliefs.⁹ The right is "far-reaching and profound; it encompasses freedom of thought on all matters, personal conviction and the commitment to religion or belief, whether manifested individually or in community with others". The fundamental character of these freedoms is reflected in the fact that they cannot be derogated from, even in time of public

emergency.¹⁰ Notably regarding cults, it is also not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions/beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to traditional religions.¹¹

11. The *Charter* also similarly protects the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, including the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of choice and to demonstrate that religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching, either individually or as part of a community, in public or in private. A person must not be coerced or restrained in a way that limits the freedom to have or adopt a religion or belief in worship, observance, practice or teaching.¹²

Freedom of association:

12. The *ICCPR* protects the right to freedom of association with others.¹³ No restrictions may be placed on the exercise of this right other than those prescribed by law and necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, public order, protection of public health or morals or protection of the rights and freedoms of others.¹⁴ This protects the right of all persons to group together voluntarily for a common goal.¹⁵ It serves as a vehicle for the exercise of other civil and social rights, including to engage in social activities, religious observances or other beliefs.¹⁶
13. The *Charter* similarly protects the right to freedom of association with others.¹⁷

Freedom of opinion and expression:

14. The *ICCPR* protects the right to hold opinions without interference, and to freedom of expression.¹⁸ Freedom of expression may be subject to certain restrictions, but only as are provided by law and necessary for the protection of public order, etc.¹⁹ These are the foundation stone for a free and democratic society.²⁰ Notably regarding cults, freedom of expression protects not only favourable information/ideas, but also unpopular ideas including that offend or shock (subject to limitations).²¹
15. The *Charter* similarly protects the right to hold opinions and freedom of expression.²²

Relevance to any reform regarding cults and OFGs:

16. It is vitally important that these important rights are upheld in any reform regarding cults and OFGs. The fact such rights are protected both internationally under the *ICCPR* and also domestically under the *Charter* points to the clear and direct obligation of Government to uphold them in Victoria.
17. Essentially, both instruments protect the rights of Victorians to adopt any belief, religion or opinion they wish, to manifest/demonstrate them, and to freely associate with all sorts of official and unofficial groups around common causes. The ability of groups to adopt and share certain values is also protected. Even if it seems apparent to most people that the beliefs and practices of cults and OFGs are questionable at best, the Government must uphold these freedoms unless there is a specific justification to limit such rights (and to the extent allowed) under such instruments.²³
18. While we broadly agree with the Guidance Note²⁴ that religious freedom “does not grant a licence to cause harm”, and that there is “a distinction between genuine religious practice and harmful behaviour”, there are apparently high bars under the *ICCPR* and *Charter* for limiting such freedoms. In our view, any reform which directly prohibits the operation of cults or OFGs (or indirectly achieves this sort of outcome through other legislative means) may inappropriately transgress these rights.

Religious doctrines, Biblical teaching and church practices could possibly be misinterpreted as cult-like

19. The Inquiry’s Terms of Reference (‘TOR’)²⁵ require consideration of “methods used to recruit and control” the members of cults and OFGs and “the impacts of coercive control”. The Inquiry website explains that this is about whether current laws are strong enough to deal with groups using control

or manipulation in ways that can seriously hurt people.²⁶ The Inquiry questionnaire²⁷ seeking public responses and the Guidance Note²⁸ set out lists of possible behaviours/experiences in this regard.

20. The ACL understands the concern about people being controlled or manipulated by cults or OFGs in harmful ways. However, there seems to be some potential for mainstream religious doctrines, Biblical teaching and/or church practices to be misinterpreted by this Inquiry. For example:

- a. Discipleship: Christianity teaches about discipleship. Primarily, Christians are considered disciples of Jesus Christ, fully submitted to seeking to follow, imitate and obey God. However, discipleship may also refer to an intentional relationship between Christians, where one person is teaching and leading another with a desire to help them follow God. This is a consensual, positive and reciprocal type of relationship, but submission to a mentor's guidance and authority is common. This can involve a high level of influence by one person on the other person's decisions, including important lifestyle, education, employment and relationship decisions. Guidance given may be firm or even unwavering, given the strong motivation to influence a disciple to make wise decisions in accordance with Biblical beliefs or convictions. Discipleship can also involve conflict, including one person challenging another to behave or not behave in certain ways as a Christian. Mutual freedom and love are key to such relationships, but there may be the potential for people to misunderstand discipleship as using manipulation or control. Senior ministers, elders or even pastors in positions of influence over church members may be involved in discipling and guiding their decisions, which necessarily involves an authority or power imbalance. While Christians commonly choose to be involved in discipleship relationships for their own growth and benefit, we understand how people could misunderstand that they are used as a means of control. Notably, the Guidance Note refers to 'controlling leadership' (e.g. which claims authority and demands 'total obedience' from members) as associated with cults. This might suggest that churches which strongly encourage submission to discipleship, particularly to a leader or pastor's authoritative guidance, could potentially be considered as demonstrating cult-like behaviour.
- b. Church discipline: It is an important teaching in the Christian faith to live holy lives as individuals and collectively. The Bible contains instructions for correcting sinful behaviour in the church. People who refuse to change sinful behaviour may ultimately face the involvement of leadership and church discipline (non-physical consequences of some kind, potentially regarding their continued involvement in the church). The Biblical process prioritises privacy, full restoration of the person and preserving fellowship between believers. However, people could misunderstand such processes as involving manipulation or control, including because the authority and procedures of a church may ultimately be engaged regarding a person against their wishes. These processes could also be firm or unwavering in terms of what is seen as sinful behaviour (and therefore unacceptable and warranting church discipline if the person refuses to listen). Christians generally understand such processes as for the ultimate good of the person and protective of the wider congregation, but they could be misunderstood as intended to "punish disobedience" or cause guilt/shame in the sorts of terms the Guidance Note associates with cults.
- c. Financial giving: The Bible teaches about tithing (regularly giving one-tenth of a financial amount to a religious entity), offerings, giving and generosity. There are different beliefs among Christian churches about such matters and whether and how they seek tithes and/or offerings. Ultimately, many Christians do give financially to churches, and some churches may specifically request this and/or teach about what they consider believers should give Biblically and if/what the benefits of doing so are. It is widely understood that Christians should give freely and without compulsion, but there may be potential for people to misunderstand that there is pressure, manipulation or control involved. Notably, the Guidance Note refers to things like financial 'commitments',

‘mandatory donations or tithes’ and pressure to make large donations as things that may be associated with cults, and the Inquiry questionnaire to ‘financial control or exploitation’. This might suggest that churches which are seen to seek financial offerings in any pressured, manipulated or controlled way could potentially be considered as engaging in cult-like behaviour.

- d. Evangelism: Christianity is an evangelistic religion. Believers are exhorted by scripture to share their faith with non-believers in the hope of seeing them converted. This is done out of deep love and concern for others but could be misunderstood as involving coercion or manipulation. For example, some of the ‘recruitment tactics’ and ‘methods’ of cults listed in the Guidance Note could be likened to how some Christians evangelise, e.g. appealing to people seeking meaning, identity, or community, often during vulnerable life stages; approaching people in emotional, financial, or psychological distress; using charismatic influencers; promising transformation or salvation; using social events to build rapport (e.g. potluck dinner or youth groups); offering to help solve a personal problem; sharing rehearsed transformation stories to inspire trust and hope; etc. While other aspects listed bear little resemblance to Christian evangelism, the Guidance Note acknowledges that cults may use only some of the listed tactics and that recruitment methods vary widely. Regardless, Christians seeking to minister to people in personal crisis, speak about the salvation Jesus Christ promises to believers or invite people to church events like youth groups could apparently be considered as using some cult-like recruitment tactics. The convicting nature of evangelistic topics relating to sin and eternal consequences might also be misconstrued as applying the sort of emotional pressure or guilt/shame/fear the Guidance Note suggests may be associated with cults. Well-intentioned affection and attention for non-believers could even potentially be construed as cult-like ‘love bombing’, or the encouragement of deep repentance potentially even demonstrating the type of ‘confession and public shaming’ associated with cults.
- e. Eschatology: The Bible contains information relating to eschatology, i.e. things that will happen in future ‘end times’, including regarding the return of Jesus Christ, wars, pestilence, famine, death, the destruction of earthly things, the ultimate destiny of the Earth, the judgment of human souls, etc. There are a wide variety of interpretations and beliefs about such matters among Christian churches. However, many eschatological beliefs, such as Dispensationalism, could be considered ‘apocalyptic’. Though not the intent of such scriptures, this could potentially lead some people to fear for the future or for the destiny of their soul. Notably, the Inquiry questionnaire refers to ‘mind control techniques or indoctrination’ or ‘fear-based teachings or apocalyptic beliefs’ as associated with cults and OFGs, and the Guidance Note to similar terms. This might suggest that churches which teach Dispensational eschatology, or any form of ‘apocalyptic’ eschatology could potentially be considered as engaging in cult-like practices.
- f. Volunteering: Many Christians give their time (completely unpaid) to serve in church ministries. This is entirely voluntary, but could potentially be misunderstood as driven by manipulation or control, particularly if churches publicly or specifically request people to volunteer. Notably, the Inquiry questionnaire refers to ‘forced labour or unpaid work’ as potentially associated with cults and OFGs, and the Guidance Note to ‘unpaid labour’ or members working long hours for little/no pay. This might suggest that churches which emphasise volunteerism, or which heavily rely on volunteers to run the church, could potentially be considered as engaging in cult-like practices.
- g. Dress, speech, conduct and fasting: The Bible contains instructions for Christians regarding things like their manner of dress, speech and conduct. While Christians are entirely free to make their own choices, churches may teach about Biblical standards and potentially even set expectations for members in particular roles or in leadership. Notably, the Inquiry questionnaire refers to ‘Loss

of personal freedoms (e.g., dress, speech, movement)' as potentially associated with cults and OFGs, and the Guidance Note to similar terms, e.g. restrictions on communication. This might suggest that churches which teach or set expectations regarding dress, speech and conduct for members could potentially be considered as engaging in cult-like practices. The Guidance Note even mentions 'fasting' (a very common Christian discipline) as potentially associated with cults.

21. Overall, we are concerned that mainstream Christian doctrines, teaching and/or practices across a range of areas could potentially be likened to cult-like behaviours given the broad terms and phrases used in Inquiry material. A wide range of beliefs and practices may apparently be considered relevant by the Committee. While the Inquiry likely does not intend to position mainstream Christianity to be seen as cult-like, we have included the above information to help the Committee distinguish cult-like beliefs and practices from those in mainstream Christianity. Any legislative or policy response to this Inquiry must not in any way seek to define, interpret, interfere with or restrict such matters.
22. The Inquiry website²⁹ clearly states that it will not focus on "minor yet mainstream faiths that may seem unfamiliar or 'strange' to outsiders" and which have at times been inaccurately labelled as cults despite lacking harmful behaviours. While this is somewhat reassuring, it also demonstrates the negative consequences that might accompany any reform. The Guidance Note³⁰ acknowledges that the term 'cult' carries strong negative connotations, and may lead to stigma, misrepresentation and even infringements on freedom of belief or association. Even any suggestion or implication arising from this Inquiry that certain Christian churches or teachings may have similarities to cults or OFGs must be prevented, as this may be very damaging to their mission and perception by society. There is a key distinction between cults (which involve coercion) and churches (where the nature and extent of people's engagement in every respect is entirely voluntary) that must be maintained.

There is a real risk of inadvertent interference with mainstream Christian churches and practices

23. Cult-like groups may hold pseudo-Christian beliefs or carry out practices which are somewhat similar to mainstream churches. This may make it difficult to distinguish between such groups. For example:
 - a. EL is recognised as having "some similarities with Christianity" due to its teachings on things such as 'freedom from sin', 'evil', 'spirits' and 'demons' and its recognition of a 'Christ'. However, it is apparently not a form of Christianity, as it reportedly teaches that their Christ was reincarnated as a woman from central China known as 'Lightning Deng', and that a great red dragon inhabits China (which do not accord with the Christian Bible or mainstream church teachings).³¹
 - b. SCJ may involve Bible studies, prayer, evangelising and teaching about Christian concepts such as 'God', 'Jesus', 'Judgment Day' and the 'Kingdom of Heaven'. However, it is apparently not a form of Christianity, as it was reportedly founded by a 'self-proclaimed messiah'³² 'Promised Pastor'³³ Lee Man Hee and only those who hear the word of Shincheonji, passed down to Hee by God, will be saved³⁴ (which does not accord with the Christian Bible or mainstream church teachings).
24. Reports regarding the above two groups also indicate that the differences between these groups and mainstream Christianity is not always initially apparent, even to those who are familiar with Christian beliefs or who are a part of mainstream churches. For example, a Sydney-based pastor has reported that members of EL have joined local churches (apparently sometimes using false names), enthusiastically participated and even been baptised or become part of the leadership before it has become apparent that they have other divergent beliefs.³⁵ EL is in fact apparently known for its secrecy, as it is an 'underground' group in China.³⁶ Ex-members of SCJ have also reported that they initially did not know they were becoming involved with SCJ and not a mainstream Christian group.³⁷

25. For such reasons, we are concerned about the risk of any reform targeting cults and OFGs to also inadvertently interfere with mainstream Christian organisations and their practices. In our view, opening the door for any Government overreach in this regard is a real and major risk. Evidently, the distinction between cults or OFGs and Christian entities may be a somewhat blurry line to draw.
26. The Guidance Note³⁸ itself confirms that though ‘cults’ are often perceived as extreme, secretive or harmful, there is no universally accepted definition, and what is considered a ‘cult’ “varies widely” depending on cultural, social or personal perspectives. Though the use of clear, objective criteria is suggested, this may be difficult to apply in practice. Even the example definition of cults in the Guidance Note could potentially apply to some Christian churches, if they are seen to have “a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some thing” (e.g. God) and employ “ethically manipulative techniques of persuasion and control” (e.g. ‘powerful group pressures’, ‘use of special methods to heighten ‘subservience’, etc.) to advance leaders’ goals to the “possible” detriment of members.
27. The definition of OFGs in the Guidance Note³⁹ also only refers to an ‘understanding’ that it includes “groups that employ cult-like tactics”, which could include many groups with even just some such characteristics. Because there is a diversity of beliefs and practices among Christian churches, those with ‘stricter’ or more ‘fringe’ views may be at increased risk of being seen as OFGs. The Guidance Note does not exclude theologically based or religious groups (like churches) being considered OFGs.
28. Even secular media articles about the Inquiry acknowledge that it will be an extraordinarily complex task to untangle “where the threads of accepted theological belief and practice end, and where “high demand” religion and coercion begin”.⁴⁰ Christianity at its core involves a person submitting themselves entirely to God, which influences all aspects of their life. This is from one perspective necessarily demanding (though entirely voluntary) and could be mistaken as driven by manipulation or coercion. It could potentially even be misunderstood as the sort of ‘loss of personal autonomy’ (i.e. expectation to give up personal goals “to focus fully on the group’s mission”), associated with cults in the Guidance Note.⁴¹ We query whether other religious groups especially known for recruiting or radicalising people, e.g. certain Islamic groups, might also be caught in a similar way.
29. Ultimately, any reform arising from this Inquiry must not open the door for any level of practical Government interference in Christian churches or their affairs. It is vitally important that a boundary is drawn in this regard to prevent any Government regulation of or intrusion into matters of church life, doctrine, teaching, discipleship, fellowship, operational activities, etc. To avoid this, any policy or legislative reform should not seek to define cults or OFGs in a way that could potentially capture mainstream Christian doctrines, teaching or practices. Christian churches should also be explicitly excluded from any measures that target the recruitment methods or impacts of cults and OFGs.

Existing laws already prohibit unlawful activities which may be commonly associated with cults/OFGs

30. We understand that existing laws already prohibit the types of clearly unlawful activities that may be commonly associated with cults/OFGs. This mitigates the need for new laws. For example, the:
 - a. *Crimes Act 1958* (Vic)⁴² has offences relating to causing injury/violence, threats to kill/seriously injure, stalking, extortion, assaults, sexual offences (including re children), failure by a person in authority to protect a child from a sexual offence, failure to disclose a sexual offence against a child, child abuse, kidnapping, obtaining property/financial advantage by deception, other fraud and dishonesty offences, etc.. It also refers to common law offences such as common assault, conspiracy to cheat and defraud, conspiracy to defraud, false imprisonment, kidnapping, etc.
 - b. *Summary Offences Act 1966* (Vic)⁴³ also contains some offences regarding less serious assaults, the public use of threatening, insulting and abusive words, etc.

- c. *Surveillance Devices Act 1999* (Vic)⁴⁴ regulates the installation and use of surveillance devices in Victoria, i.e. it contains provisions relating to 'technology-facilitated abuse'.⁴⁵
 - d. *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic)⁴⁶ contains offences relating to the protection of children, including failing to protect a child from harm (including relating to physical injury, sexual abuse, emotional or psychological harm, physical development or health, etc.).
 - e. *Criminal Code Act 1995* (Cth)⁴⁷ contains offences relating to things like slavery and slavery-like offences and serious crimes against humanity (e.g. torture, etc.).
 - f. *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth)⁴⁸ and *Fair Work Regulations 2009* (Cth)⁴⁹ govern employee and employer relationships, including minimum entitlements relating to any paid work.⁵⁰
31. The Inquiry Questionnaire⁵¹ lists a range of cult and OFG behaviours/experiences of concern which may be relevant under such laws (if they reach the relevant thresholds), including financial control or exploitation, physical violence and/or sexual abuse, forced labour or unpaid work, surveillance or monitoring, restricted access to education or medical care, and child abuse or neglect. These things may clearly involve unlawful conduct which should be caught by the existing legislative offences and protections. As such, we do not think that there is any need to introduce new legislation to directly (or indirectly) prohibit the operation of cults or OFGs on the basis that they involve unlawful activity.
32. Furthermore, if these existing legislations are able to deal with abusive and toxic behaviours in non-religious institutions, such as the CFMEU, as well as coercive practices, such as forced marriages and religious-based domestic abuse, within elements of mainstream religions, it is evident that no new and specific legislation is needed to control cults or OFGs.
33. For such reasons, the Inquiry should strongly resist any push to introduce new coercive control laws.

Recommendations:

- 1. The ACL does *not* support the introduction of any new legislation in response to this Inquiry. This includes laws to directly prohibit the operation of cults or OFGs (or to indirectly achieve this outcome through other legislative means), or to introduce any form of new coercive control laws. Even endless legislative reform may not be sufficient to prevent targeted harms from continuing to occur.
- 2. In our view, better enforcement of existing laws, public education and victim-focused support will better protect Victorians and prevent future harms, and should instead be the priority.
- 3. In light of this, the ACL recommends the Government to:
 - a. **Set up support groups** for people who are harmed by cults. Their emotional and psychological wellbeing and recovery should be the key focus as a result of this inquiry;
 - b. **Initiate education programs** to increase community education and public awareness about cults, and essentially assist people to identify cult activities thus protect themselves from falling victim to relevant harms). Prevention strategies will better protect our community.
 - c. **Establish new reporting system or hotline** for people to report harmful cult activities and groups.

¹ See, for example, this report by news.com.au: <https://www.news.com.au/world/asia/church-of-almighty-god-or-eastern-lightning-in-australia-fears-the-terrifying-chinese-cult-is-gaining-ground/news-story/2d424456f76489edf9fac65df2f9210d>. See also this Australian Institute of International Affairs website: <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-great-red-dragon-and-the-lightning-storm-chinas-increasing-pressure-on-fringe-religious-groups/>.

² See, for example, this report by the Herald Sun:

https://www.heraldsun.com.au/subscribe/news/1/?sourceCode=HSWEB_WRE170_a_GGL&dest=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.heraldsun.com.au%2Fvictoria-education%2Ftertiary%2Fmelbourne-university-students-target-of-toxic-south-korean-religious-group%2Fnews-story%2F42bfd1c6300dd9a9798b4fd760bcd9be&memtype=anonymous&mode=premium&v21=GROUPA-Segment-2-NOSCORE.

³ Available on the website of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>.

⁴ See website for the Australian Human Rights Commission: <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/education/human-rights-explained-australia-and-human-rights-treaties#:~:text=Australia%20has%20agreed%20to%20be,all%20forms%20of%20Racial%20Discrimination>. See also discussion about the implementing the ICCPR in domestic law on the Parliament of Australia website: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/Freedomofreligion/Interim_Report/section?id=committees%2Freportjnt%2F024110%2F25347.

⁵ See Victorian Legislation website here: <https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/acts/charter-human-rights-and-responsibilities-act-2006/015>.

⁶ See section 5 of the *Charter*.

⁷ See section 7 of the *Charter*.

⁸ See Article 18 of the ICCPR.

⁹ See website of the Australian Government Attorney-General's Department: <https://www.ag.gov.au/rights-and-protections/human-rights-and-anti-discrimination/human-rights-scrutiny/public-sector-guidance-sheets/right-freedom-thought-conscience-and-religion-or-belief#:~:text=All%20persons%20have%20the%20right,%2C%20observance%2C%20practice%20and%20teaching..>

¹⁰ See website of the Australian Human Rights Commission: <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/rights-and-freedoms/freedom-thought-conscience-and-religion-or-belief>. See also Article 4.2 of the ICCPR. See also General Comment 22 adopted by the United Nations Human Rights Committee regarding Article 18: <https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=jevaz5KB4mWa5JrAvNedc%2FS5%2Fy3oUjeAliPAXXZhdsDiWRwYldjHbrzwyKUpEMCUF8fhv2l%2B9%2FEkhpwhyFrfaXuCl9xsn93YxSMSVLeDGOY%3D>.

¹¹ See website of the Australian Human Rights Commission: <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/rights-and-freedoms/freedom-thought-conscience-and-religion-or-belief>. See also General Comment 22 adopted by the United Nations Human Rights Committee regarding Article 18: <https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=jevaz5KB4mWa5JrAvNedc%2FS5%2Fy3oUjeAliPAXXZhdsDiWRwYldjHbrzwyKUpEMCUF8fhv2l%2B9%2FEkhpwhyFrfaXuCl9xsn93YxSMSVLeDGOY%3D>.

¹² See section 14 of the *Charter*.

¹³ See Article 22 of the ICCPR.

¹⁴ See Article 22 of the ICCPR.

¹⁵ See website of the Australian Government Attorney-General's Department: <https://www.ag.gov.au/rights-and-protections/human-rights-and-anti-discrimination/human-rights-scrutiny/public-sector-guidance-sheets/right-freedom-assembly-and-association#:~:text=The%20right%20to%20freedom%20of%20association%20protects%20the%20right%20of,governmental%20organisations%20and%20trade%20unions..>

¹⁶ See website of the Australian Human Rights Commission: <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/rights-and-freedoms/freedom-association>.

¹⁷ See section 16 of the *Charter*.

¹⁸ See Article 19 of the ICCPR.

¹⁹ See Article 19 of the ICCPR.

²⁰ See website of the Australian Human Rights Commission: <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/rights-and-freedoms/freedom-information-opinion-and-expression>.

²¹ See website of the Australian Government Attorney-General's Department: <https://www.ag.gov.au/rights-and-protections/human-rights-and-anti-discrimination/human-rights-scrutiny/public-sector-guidance-sheets/right-freedom-opinion-and-expression>.

²² See section 15 of the *Charter*.

²³ See also General Comment 22 adopted by the United Nations Human Rights Committee regarding Article 18: <https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=jevaz5KB4mWa5JrAvNedc%2FS5%2Fy3oUjeAliPAXXZhdsDiWRwYldjHbrzwyKUpEMCUF8fhv2l%2B9%2FEkhpwhyFrfaXuCl9xsn93YxSMSVLeDGOY%3D>.

²⁴ See the Inquiry Guidance Note here: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/cofg/guidance-note>.

²⁵ See the Inquiry TOR here: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/49964e/contentassets/0a3bd4cfb13242099af97f4bd92482a5/terms-of-reference-attachments/terms-of-reference.pdf>.

²⁶ See Inquiry website: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/cofg>.

²⁷ See Inquiry questionnaire here: <https://forms.office.com/pages/responsepage.aspx?id=7PAagkAxN0GvDmaQKG-2cylh4glz41xllThBvkxNgeFUNUoyME9XOE9CWllUNE1YMEsyQkcyRTczVy4u&route=shorturl>.

²⁸ See the Inquiry Guidance Note here: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/cofg/guidance-note>.

²⁹ See this Inquiry website: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/cofg>.

³⁰ See the Inquiry Guidance Note here: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/cofg/guidance-note>.

³¹ See, for example, this report by news.com.au: <https://www.news.com.au/world/asia/church-of-almighty-god-or-eastern-lightning-in-australia-fears-the-terrifying-chinese-cult-is-gaining-ground/news-story/2d424456f76489edf9fac65df2f9210d>.

³² See, for example, this report by the Herald Sun: https://www.heraldsun.com.au/subscribe/news/1/?sourceCode=HSWEB_WRE170_a_GGL&dest=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.heraldsun.com.au%2Fvictoria-education%2Ftertiary%2Fmelbourne-university-students-target-of-toxic-south-korean-religious-group%2Fnews-story%2F42bfd1c6300dd9a9798b4fd760bcd9be&memtype=anonymous&mode=premium&v21=GROUPA-Segment-2-NOSCORE.

³³ See this 'Shincheonji USA' website: <https://www.scjus.org/>.

³⁴ See, for example, this report by ABC News: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-04-03/shincheonji-religion-universities-australia-former-members-speak/104928098>.

³⁵ See, for example, this report by news.com.au: <https://www.news.com.au/world/asia/church-of-almighty-god-or-eastern-lightning-in-australia-fears-the-terrifying-chinese-cult-is-gaining-ground/news-story/2d424456f76489edf9fac65df2f9210d>.

³⁶ See this Australian Institute of International Affairs website: <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-great-red-dragon-and-the-lightning-storm-chinas-increasing-pressure-on-fringe-religious-groups/>.

³⁷ See, for example, this report by the Herald Sun: https://www.heraldsun.com.au/subscribe/news/1/?sourceCode=HSWEB_WRE170_a_GGL&dest=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.heraldsun.com.au%2Fvictoria-education%2Ftertiary%2Fmelbourne-university-students-target-of-toxic-south-korean-religious-group%2Fnews-story%2F42bfd1c6300dd9a9798b4fd760bcd9be&memtype=anonymous&mode=premium&v21=GROUPA-Segment-2-NOSCORE.

³⁸ See the Inquiry Guidance Note here: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/cofg/guidance-note>.

³⁹ See the Inquiry Guidance Note here: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/cofg/guidance-note>.

⁴⁰ See, for example, this ABC News article: <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/all-to-jesus-i-surrender-christianity-and-coercive-control/105259848>.

⁴¹ See the Inquiry Guidance Note here: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/cofg/guidance-note>.

⁴² See Victorian Legislation website: <https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/acts/crimes-act-1958/307>.

⁴³ See Victorian Legislation website: <https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/acts/summary-offences-act-1966/136>.

⁴⁴ See Victorian Legislation website: <https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/acts/surveillance-devices-act-1999/040>.

⁴⁵ See website for The Women's Services Network: https://techsafety.org.au/blog/legal_articles/legal-guide-to-surveillance-legislation-in-vic/.

⁴⁶ See Victorian Legislation website: <https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/acts/children-youth-and-families-act-2005/121>.

⁴⁷ See Federal Register of Legislation here: <https://www.legislation.gov.au/C2004A04868/latest/text>.

⁴⁸ See Federal Register of Legislation here: <https://www.legislation.gov.au/C2009A00028/latest/text>.

⁴⁹ See Federal Register of Legislation here: <https://www.legislation.gov.au/F2009L02356/latest/versions>.

⁵⁰ See this Fair Work Ombudsman website: <https://www.fairwork.gov.au/about-us/legislation>.

⁵¹ See Inquiry questionnaire here: <https://forms.office.com/pages/responsepage.aspx?id=7PAagkAxN0GvDmaQKG-2cylh4glz41xllThBvkxNgeFUNUoyME9XOE9CWllUNE1YMEsyQkcyRTczVy4u&route=shorturl>.