

# **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 23 July 2025

#### **MEMBERS**

Ella George – Chair

Annabelle Cleeland – Deputy Chair

Chris Couzens

John Lister

Cindy McLeish

Jackson Taylor

Rachel Westaway

#### **WITNESSES**

Ryan Carey, and

Catherine Carey

**The CHAIR:** Good morning. 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 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. I pay my respects to their elders past, present and future and extend that respect to First Nations people across Victoria. I thank Victoria's First Nations people for their many thousands of years of care for their country.

I also acknowledge my colleagues who are participating today: Christine Couzens, the Member for Geelong; Cindy McLeish, the Member for Eildon; Rachel Westaway, the Member for Prahran; and John Lister, the Member for Werribee. Annabelle Cleeland, the Member for Euroa and Deputy Chair, will be joining us shortly.

Earlier this year, the Legislative Assembly tasked the Legal and Social Issues Committee with an inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups. The Committee will report back no later than 30 September 2026. Today the Committee is holding its first public hearings for this inquiry. This inquiry is not about judging or questioning anyone's beliefs. What we are focused on is the behaviour of cults and high-control groups that use coercive techniques to recruit and control their members and the impacts of those behaviours.

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 cults and organised fringe groups. Today the Committee will hear from Catherine and Ryan Carey and Richard Baker. I thank the witnesses for their 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 I welcome Catherine and Ryan Carey. I invite you to make an opening statement, and this will be followed by questions from Members. Thank you.

**Ryan CAREY:** Okay. I would like to thank the Committee for giving us this opportunity today. This is a difficult space to be in. This is a very difficult subject, but this is our life experience. We are here today to talk to you guys about stopping the copious amount of damage that is being done in the Victorian community.

I will start off for myself and Catherine. I was born into the Geelong Revival Centre. It has been labelled as a cult; I believe it is a cult by its behaviour, if you go through the BITE model. I carry the lasting damage of what that place has done to me, and my friends and people I care about have that lasting damage with them. Cults, fringe groups and places that operate under coercive control—they are states within a state. The cult that I was a part of acted like its own state. It had its own rules, it had its own enforcement, it had its own surveillance. So from the minute I was born, I might have lived in the state of Victoria, but I answered to the cult and the cult leader. I was controlled by the cult and the cult leader. Anything was to be reported to them. Even if it was a criminal action in the cult, it had to go to the leader and was not to go to police.

Cults behave the same. We have both formed what is called the Stop Religious Coercion Australia group. We now talk to a lot of other cult survivors in the community. When I was deconstructing and leaving the cult it became very evident that the same methods are used across the board in all these coercive control groups. They use friends, family and fear to control their members. The loss of community is the biggest threat in a place like this. The loss of family is the biggest threat in a place like this. And then there is the fear aspect. I knew that if I fell out of favour with the leadership or did anything that in normal society would be permissible—in there it would not be permissible—I could lose my whole support network. I could lose everyone I loved and cared about. In those groups you are very isolated from any outside help or any outside resources. That was the main crux of how they hold and control you, because the minute you want to have your own life or just do something as a normal adult or a normal teenager that is permissible under Victorian law, that might fall foul of the rules and you will lose everyone you care about and love and be shamed. So yes, you lose your family, your friends

as well—they are forced to ostracise you as well. If you are removed or put out of fellowship from that group, your friends are not to talk to you, and they are under threat as well. You can suffer the same fate if you talk to somebody who has been removed from the group, which is incredibly heartbreaking. So you are left without any support network, and normally at a vulnerable time.

There is the fear aspect as well. From the minute I was born till I could understand I was virtually told that the world was going to end, and I grew up in a constant state of fear. I was told stuff like that I would never make my 21st birthday. I did not think I would get married. We were told constantly the world would end at any moment. I was told that I had to recruit my friends and the people around me or else they would burn in hell. As an isolated child you believe that, because you believe what your parents are saying, because they believe it 100%. So you are living in a world that you think is going to end, and that would extend—there was no requirement for me to ever do well in life because the world was going to end and what was the point. Do not make friendships outside the group because they are all going to burn in hell, unless they want to come along. That led to massive anxiety issues, and it was also an environment where you were forbidden to get psychiatric help. So yes, it is a very damaging and destructive place for a person to be growing up in, and I did not have any choice in this matter. There were no protections, there was no-one there to step in and there was no support for me, and there is still no support for young people in these environments. This situation has not changed since I was a kid. This is still being replicated today.

**Catherine CAREY:** I think one of the main things is we are not here to try and shut anyone's religion down. We do not want that; everyone should be free to practise their own religion. But what these places do is they abuse people under the guise of religion, and that is what is the main issue. The coercive control that they perpetrate towards people has lasting damage for years and years and years, and that is what we are here to try and stop. Everyone should be free to be able to worship whatever they want or to join whatever sort of group they want, but no group should be allowed to control people in any way. I think any rational person would agree that the way they are controlling people is completely unacceptable.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you both very much for your opening statements. Ryan, I would like to pick up on something that you spoke about, which is support. You said that there was no support for young people in these kinds of environments. I would really appreciate your opinions on how the Victorian Government can better support people who are thinking about leaving a cult and who have also taken that step to leave that environment.

**Ryan CAREY:** Information and education are key, if there is readily available information in the community and if there is education in schools and even campaign education to identify what is abuse in this situation and what is just normal religious practice. The support needs to be there. There needs to be an ability for a young person to call a hotline or contact somebody safely and say, 'Hey, look, this is the situation I'm in. I'm in trouble.' A lot of these kids are suffering, and I know I was through that situation as well, where I was suffering complete mental angst. It has led to suicides. I know of suicides in even teenage years where kids stuck in that situation have suicided. It feels like a hopeless situation. There needs to be a way these people can call out for help and get it from people that are actually qualified to deal with it.

We had one young individual. She was 19. She had escaped. She cannot go back to that home. She went to apply for the dole. She has got severe issues from the abuse suffered in the household, in the cult—psychological issues. She went to apply for the dole. The dole virtually told her that, because her parents do not hit her and that she is on drugs, she has to go back to the home. Also, the fact that she was required to get signatures off her parents to apply for the dole—like, how can you do that? Her parents are trying to coerce her back into the home to keep her in the cult, and this kid cannot be there anymore because her psychological damage is so great. For a lot of these young people the workforce is incredibly hard, they are that damaged at the start, and they need that extra support as well.

**Catherine CAREY:** I think also having survivor-led assistance—so having an organisation led by survivors who have the experience and the lived experience to be able to say, 'I understand what you're going through. I know. I've been there myself, and I can help you get through it'—is a major factor in that. As Ryan said, Centrelink are doing their best, but they do not actually have the knowledge to know that a coercive controlled group is actually an abusive situation, and it means that it is not a safe home environment. So by having people who are able to say 'This is how it is abusive' and explain it to people who have moved through that situation

themselves and have sort of moved past the initial damage, instead of having a 19-year-old trying to explain to someone why they cannot live at home anymore, would make a massive difference for a lot of survivors.

**Ryan CAREY:** There also needs to be police education in it as well, because I have spoken to members of other cults that have escaped, and they have feared for their physical harm, really. There also needs to be education for law enforcement in how these groups operate and that these people might need to be put in a safe space as well.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. You have helped build a support network for survivors of cults and high-control organisations. How can the Victorian Government best support a network like yours to do the important work that you are doing?

**Ryan CAREY:** We need funding for counselling, and we need all those other networks to tie into what we are doing as far as support goes. We need oversight and laws to stop it from happening, but we need that back-end support into our groups. We are sort of jerry-rigging this together as we go.

**Catherine CAREY:** I think we can also take that question on notice. We have got a group submission that has been worked on with consultation from over 80 other survivors that goes into great detail on how best the government can support us. You will be receiving it shortly. It has been authored by Patrick McIvor, Renee Spencer, Clare McIvor and Janja Lulich, and it is in the process of getting survivor signatures at the moment. A number of other organisations, including ours, have signed on to support it and its recommendations. There is a great amount of detail on what the government can actively do and reasonably do to help in that space.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Just one more question on support from me. You have spoken about the need for counselling to support people who are coming out of these environments. How well equipped are the current mental health services to support cult survivors, and what changes would you recommend to the government that they can prioritise to make the most difference?

**Catherine CAREY:** There is an excellent group at the moment called the Religious Trauma Collective, and what their experience is is they have counsellors who have either lived experience or a lot of experience in dealing with victims of group-based coercion. They collate them and say to people, 'These are counsellors with whom you are not going to spend the first three sessions trying to explain the group you have come from.' They understand what group coercion is and they can move from there, so that would help a lot. I think that group could look at getting funding from the government to expand that or to help provide training programs to other counsellors. There are not enough counsellors for anyone at the moment, but this is such a big issue, especially being brought up with the inquiry. I think that being able to train really all organisations in how to help with this situation, but especially if they could be provided with funding to on-train people to do the work, would make a massive difference, because you would increase the pool of people that are available to have the training.

**Ryan CAREY:** It is a difficult thing, because we need that extra education for counsellors to tailor that counselling for these people. Take, for instance, drug and alcohol counselling and rehab. Some of these people are so broken, they are going to fall to drugs and alcohol and stuff like that just because they are not coping. Trying to catch them before they get to that is the key. But unfortunately we do have members that have fallen to that and then they have found themselves in religious-based drug and alcohol facilities, which has just completely retraumatised them and made them try to get out the door. And some of these places have actually been quite culty in the way they have tried to push their brand of religion on them. There is stuff like even just simple drugs and alcohol reform for these guys too that is just critical, and education within the counselling world or the psychiatry world to know: hey, to deal with this, this is key, because it is just not run of the mill really.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Cindy, would you like to ask some questions?

**Cindy McLEISH:** Yes. I have got a couple of questions just about family and friends. First of all, how many members are there at the church?

**Ryan CAREY:** Currently this one I think is down at 200. At its peak it was 650.

**Catherine CAREY:** Just in Geelong.

**Ryan CAREY:** Just in Geelong, but we are all across Australia. That is just ours, but we are contacted daily by other cult members in Victoria that are operating the same as what we did.

**Cindy McLEISH:** What was the cause of the 650 down to 200? Was that all people who escaped?

**Ryan CAREY:** That was escapees, yes. COVID –

**Catherine CAREY:** Or people who were—they used the term ‘put out a fellowship’, which means you are not allowed to attend and you are not allowed to speak with anyone who is attending at the time. So some people are –

**Cindy McLEISH:** They are frozen out?

**Catherine CAREY:** Yes. You are told you are not allowed to associate, and that could be for a determined period of time or that could be indefinitely.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Okay. Earlier I think, Ryan, you mentioned that you were told that people would not be able to talk to you. Were you told not to talk to other people?

**Ryan CAREY:** Yes, 100%. That was preached commonly. You were not to comfort them. There were guidelines at the back of the hall that explained that.

**Cindy McLEISH:** So one of your friends, if they were having thoughts of leaving –

**Ryan CAREY:** Yes, if they were, they were booted. They are being kicked out normally at a crisis point in their life as well. In that place you are disposable. These people have given their life to this organisation—you know, they have ostracised themselves from their families that are outside or anyone that is outside the group—but they do not realise that they are disposal to the group. The leader can get rid of them at any time, and that is a weapon that they use. They will do it to make an example to the rest. So, yes, you are told. We had guidelines at the back of the hall that if somebody is removed from the fellowship, you are not to comfort them, you are not to talk to them, you are not to have anything to do with them.

I have a lot of regrets. These were my friends growing up that I loved and cared for deeply, and for me there are a couple of them that when I escaped I apologised to, because they are my friends. I want to be there for them, and it sort of breaks my heart that I was not. Just the brutality of just—they have lost their families; they have lost everyone. We get young people that have come around to our house, and we just sit them on the couch and Catherine cooks them a meal and they play the video games with the kids, because they have lost their families. It is hard both ways—the families think they are doing this because the cult leader is telling them, ‘You’ve got to do this. If you love them, you would treat them this way.’ So even the people in the cult are suffering, but they are thinking they are doing the right thing. But they are suffering inside because it is not a natural thing to do. This issue is just—how dare that man have the right to rip that family apart that loves each other. No-one should have that right.

**Cindy McLEISH:** If people were suffering and they turned to alcohol or drugs, they would be removed?

**Ryan CAREY:** They would be removed, yes. You were not allowed to drink or smoke or anything like that in the group.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Within that cohort, did you know people that went on and suicided from your church?

**Ryan CAREY:** Yes.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Older? Younger? All ages?

**Ryan CAREY:** There were a few younger and there were a few older, yes.

**Catherine CAREY:** Not to mention ones who, because of addiction and things like that, died as a result of that from their trauma. A lot of them did have drug and alcohol problems that have resulted in their death.

**Cindy McLEISH:** My final question just relates back to your parents and their relationship with you and the leaders. Were they completely on board all of the time with the leaders if you were suffering?

**Ryan CAREY:** Yes. My dad was second in charge of the cult. My parents were zealots. They both came from broken homes. My father's family was a broken household. He had an abusive father. In my mother's family there were a lot of PTSD and suicides after the war. So they were prime pickings for a cult to pick them up and to say, 'Hey, look, we've got all the answers.' My parents were well meaning, and I still love my father, even though he passed away about 10 years ago now. But they were broken people and they were told they had the answers of life from this leader, so they were on board. Yes, they were on board, 100%.

I did start to break down in my late 20s. I became a workaholic because that was the only way I could cope. I had a business with unlimited work, so to cope or to feel worthy I just threw myself into work. If I was not at work, I was at church meetings. That was difficult on my wife because I just did not know how to cope. I would work seven days a week. It led to me collapsing on the job, and I finally admitted to my parents, 'I think I have a problem. I think I've got severe anxiety; I'm not coping.' And to my surprise—I thought my parents would just go, 'Just go away and pray about it,' because that was their answer to everything—Mum and Dad looked at me and said, 'We always knew you had a problem. We just didn't know how to fix it. We just thought you would get to victory and get healed.' Here I was working myself into the ground, yes. So they knew. They did not know how to deal with it. They were not equipped to deal with it. The cult leader was just telling them, 'This stuff doesn't exist. It's a spiritual problem. You've just got to pray about it; you've just got to look to the Lord.' But I was working myself to death.

**Cindy McLEISH:** So your parents were a little bit conflicted too.

**Ryan CAREY:** Yes. It is a hard place to be in, and they were stuck in a system of set rules that they could not escape either, because they would suffer the fate of being kicked out if they questioned too much. Unless there are safeguards and protections for people to have some safety in these places this just keeps going.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Yes. Thank you, Ella. Thank you very much, Ryan.

**Chris COUZENS:** Thank you both so much for being here today and showing such courage and particularly supporting others in the community. It is incredible work that you are doing, so thank you both very much for that. Were there any particular groups of people that were targeted by the church for recruitment?

**Catherine CAREY:** Yes, definitely.

**Chris COUZENS:** And why would they target those people?

**Catherine CAREY:** We have had a joke since we left, because where we attended they had testimonies at every meeting where people would speak up and every Sunday night they would have a salvation meeting for people to join. We used to joke that no-one ever got up and said, 'My life was excellent and then I found Jesus', it was always 'My marriage was broken,' you know, 'Things were going wrong', 'I was an alcoholic'—different things. Everyone had something very wrong in their life. They targeted vulnerable people, and they openly spoke about how if you talk to people, eventually they will tell you their problems, and that is when you can tell them the solution. And the solution was obviously coming to join.

When I joined I was 19. I had been through some very traumatic events before that. I was isolated from my friends from school, and I was ripe to be sucked into a cult, I would say. There were many, many people—it was not uncommon for school teenagers to join and then be placed with another family from the cult so that they could help them attend more meetings, and eventually many of them were completely cut off from their external families. You were told that if your family did not want to come to the meetings they were Christ rejecters and so you should cut them off as well because you did not have anything in common and things like that.

They are looking for vulnerable people. A large number of their members joined when Shell and Ford opened, so there were migrants coming over looking for community, and these places are an instant community. You are meeting multiple times a week; you are encouraged to socialise on top of that. Suddenly you have gone from maybe knowing one or two people in the town that you have just moved to to having hundreds of people that all want to spend time with you. Before you know it you are fully ingrained in that situation and you do not have a support network outside of that place, which makes it incredibly difficult if you choose to leave, because suddenly you are not just leaving a church, you are leaving your entire community.

**Chris COUZENS:** Are there still long-term members in that 200 that are left in Geelong?

**Catherine CAREY:** Yes.

**Ryan CAREY:** Yes.

**Catherine CAREY:** I would say there are not many new members. They have had some pretty bad publicity over the last few years, and I think it would be very difficult for them to get someone to come and stay now.

**Chris COUZENS:** And just another question: you have made public statements on the similarities between coercive control in cults and family violence. What legislative models do you think could be adopted to address these issues?

**Catherine CAREY:** It needs to be its own separate—we took notes on this. At the moment it is legal, but it is harmful. It spans domains—psychological, spiritual, emotional, economic harms to people. It is non-physical, it is cumulative and it is enacted across multiple actors and systems, which makes it invisible to people, which is also the issue with domestic violence coercive control. Because it needs to be separate –

**Ryan CAREY:** It needs to be tailored for that, really—for that group area. They are similar in their ways of coercion, but we have deliberately—and so it should be. The coercion in domestic violence is tailored to that. We do know that a cult is like a domestic violence situation; there is family and all that intertwined. The language that focuses on the coercion in that environment needs to be tailored to that as well. There is a good base model—we know there is good brickwork in there—for family violence, but a cult is virtually a big family, too, so it just sprays across. The joint submission we have got goes into greater detail. There was a list of about 200 behaviours in that joint submission that we have identified. That could probably go to about 600, but there are 200 key behaviours, to make it as binary as possible. We will get back to you on notice on that one, and we will give you more information.

**Chris COUZENS:** If legislation was proposed, are there key elements that you see being critical to that piece of legislation in terms of coercive control and cults? You might want to defer back to your document, but I just wondered whether you had anything to add now.

**Catherine CAREY:** I think we will take that on notice. But it is group-based coercive control, so these protections would not just protect people who are in religious groups or fringe groups; it would also protect people who are in multilevel marketing schemes or businesses that practise coercive control. It would protect someone who is in a theatre group, for example—it would protect them against coercive control. We came into this thinking about religious coercion, and the Committee took it one step further, saying we need to look at all groups, not just religious groups. The group submission has taken it a step further again and said no group should be able to practise this behaviour at all. It does go into incredible detail. I think rather than mangling the explanation, we will take that on notice, and you will be getting all that information very shortly.

**Chris COUZENS:** Thank you very much for that.

**The CHAIR:** Rachel.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** Thank you. I would like to reiterate my appreciation for the clarity with which you are providing responses and how you have come here and explained your situation with such integrity. I would like to ask a little bit and have a better understanding about the living arrangements that you have in a cult—whether you live in your own family home or whether you live in close proximity to everybody else—and I have a couple of other questions that follow on from that.

**Ryan CAREY:** On living arrangements, you were not allowed to live by yourself until after the age of 21. You were not treated as an adult until you were 21, which was bizarre, really. We were controlled as far as how far away from the location of the actual cult headquarters—we could not move to another city that had another branch of the cult. We were not allowed to do that unless there were extenuating circumstances. If we lived too far away—I think we had a radius of about 50 k's, if you look at a map –

**Catherine CAREY:** A triangle.

**Ryan CAREY:** Yes, it was sort of an area we were not allowed to move out of. I know a couple who moved out of that 50-k region, and they got put out of fellowship for doing that. So we were controlled in terms of where we lived. In terms of living arrangements, yes, you lived in your family household. We did not have a commune. There are some cults that have communes, and you are probably going to hear about those, but we lived in that family dynamic situation. You were not allowed to leave the house unless you were married, under the age of 21. You had to live with people that were an older age. So you were highly controlled as a young person. Up until you were 21, you had to answer for everything. And even then, you would get past that age and there would be just such high control of young people's lives, really.

**Catherine CAREY:** Where you could live also extended to where you could work. For us in Geelong, it was incredibly strongly discouraged for people to work in Melbourne. Even that was considered too far. The idea of commuting each day was really strongly discouraged. University as well—you were not allowed to move, so the only university available to Geelong people was really Deakin University in Geelong, which limits a lot of career options for people as well.

**Ryan CAREY:** And women were discouraged from going to university.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** Okay. That leads me to my next question in regard to your social networks. I understand you have children, and when you have children you will often go to a maternal health nurse and you will be involved in a mother's group. Ryan, you spoke in regard to your business and working long hours. I presume you dealt with suppliers, and you might have had staff working for you. In many circumstances we all develop relationships outside of our core group and family and support system with the people that we mix with, whether it be people in our mother's group or people we work with. Did you establish any relationships? I understand what you said in regard to the cult being very controlling and not supporting any of that, but was it difficult for you to stop those relationships from developing? Because in a normal circumstance, many people would establish friendships with people outside of their core group.

**Ryan CAREY:** You were made to feel guilty for having those relationships in the first place. You were made to feel guilty—if you had not recruited them, what was the point of having that relationship? I bucked the trend on that, and that is part of the reason it got me out—I developed friendships and a support network. But I was highly criticised for doing that, and I had threats as well. I became a member of my local CFA. I was always criticised for doing that, but it was advantageous for the setting up of the camp to have a CFA member in there. I was always pulled into Noel's—or the cult leader's—office and told, 'Do not get friendly with these people.' 'Do not become too familiar with them' are the words he would use. But I had formed friendships, which I am grateful for, because that is what got me out. The ones who do not form friendships or who do not secretly do that are the ones who cannot get out, and there are lots of them in there. But yes, you are highly discouraged if you are too worldly. They do not want you to make friends. But I am grateful for the friends I made, really.

**Catherine CAREY:** It is seen as a waste of time. You should build a relationship, witness to them, tell them about coming to the meetings, and then if they do not respond to that, it is almost like 'Well, why would you bother being friends with them after that?'

**Ryan CAREY:** If you have made a friendship with somebody and they are telling you about this cult and they are trying to recruit you, you are not going to stay friends with that person, are you? But there were some kind people I met. I was told the world was a bad place, but I met some lovely people, and there were people there that helped me get out, really.

**Catherine CAREY:** Even since leaving, we do talk about it quite regularly. We were told the world was awful and everyone in the world was terrible—they were the worst people in the world. But then you meet them and you are like 'Actually, you're a lot nicer than a few of the people I have met before in what was supposed to be the one true church.'

**Ryan CAREY:** They also set up their support network so you do not have time to form friendships. All day Sunday is locked up at the cult. You are there in the morning; you are not leaving till late afternoon. Christmas times we would spend at—you know, it was mandatory. We had a camp down at Ocean Grove we had to go to. There were a couple of camps for us. At Christmas it was literally two to three weeks you were immersed in that environment. On Wednesday night we were at the cult. They would have special meetings on a Friday. As



a young person you were encouraged only to hang out with other young people from the cult itself. They had their own youth group, which was highly problematic. They had their own Sunday school. So your whole life was intermixed in this place. But yes, the youth group: that would be virtually your whole Saturday night. When people were out there living free as young people, we were singing choruses in a hall in Norlane.

**Catherine CAREY:** There are people in that place who would not let their kids go to other kids' birthday parties either, so that even from a very young age you are teaching your kids: do not make friends—even at that early age.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** I do have one final question. In regard to your finances, what percentage of your income was expected to be given to –

**Ryan CAREY:** 10% or more. That was the tithe. It was 10% or more.

**Catherine CAREY:** All in cash.

**Ryan CAREY:** You could never out give the Lord is what they said.

**Catherine CAREY:** Up until COVID hit, when they began doing transfers. But before that everything was done in cash.

**Ryan CAREY:** The transfers worry me because they can see who and the amount they are giving. When it was cash the money would go into the bag, but you were really pushed to 10% and more. But now, with electronic transfer, they can see who is tithing, I have grave concerns that people would be very heavily targeted that are not meeting that mark. I think that is a very dangerous thing. They call it a free-will offering, but it is not really free will. It is like 10% or you are risking hell really.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks. John.

**John LISTER:** Thank you. And thank you for sharing your story so far with us. Catherine, I wanted to just briefly touch on—you have shown that you have got a passion for education. One of the reasons why you left GRC was because of some of the views of the leadership there around higher education. My questions do revolve around the interface between our education system and people who might be in these coercive organisations. In your experience but also through your work now, where are young people from these groups going to school?

**Catherine CAREY:** The majority of people in the GRC were going to state schools. A few were at non-secular private schools. There are a couple who went to Anglican schools in Geelong—some of the more expensive private schools. Never a Catholic school—that was completely out of the question. There were some that homeschooled as well. But the majority are at state schools where they know they are not going to be getting religious education and they know they can pull their kids out of sex education classes and things like that, so that is where most of them go. No higher education for girls—it was frowned upon for a very long time. A few people did pursue that. I have heard now it is completely just forbidden. Yes, that is what was the eventual straw that broke my decision to attend there, looking at my two daughters and thinking, 'How do I tell them that the only thing that they are good enough for is being a wife and a mother?'

**John LISTER:** From what you have said, with a lot of these young people in our state schools but generally in our system, from your experience what are some of those specific warning signs that schools, community services and wellbeing at schools should be looking for in young people who might be in these coercive organisations?

**Catherine CAREY:** I think one of the key indicators is children being removed from classes that are religion based or sex education based—that would be a very big warning sign for me. We were told that was corrupting your children to allow them to attend. Even as far as kindergarten Bravehearts sessions—that was damaging your children's innocence to allow them to go to that. I think also very isolated kids at school—they are not encouraged to make friends with people. Some of them do just to integrate themselves, and you might not ever know, but there would be many that have no friends at school other than the strange groups across year

levels of all kids who are attending this place. We know of some—there are quite a few at certain schools—and they do hang out together across year levels, which is not normally as common as well.

**John LISTER:** Not at all.

**Catherine CAREY:** Not at all. So there is that also, but I think the biggest indicator is kids being removed from the classes.

**Ryan CAREY:** As a kid that grew up in it, I went to a state school. It was probably one of the worst experiences of my life. Because you are a cult kid, you are going to get targeted and bullied. Any cult kid that goes in that system—you are different. You are not really exposed to outside. Well, you are told that the world is bad. You go to a state school—like, state schools are wild enough as it is, so, you know, you do get heavily bullied. Most kids that are in the cult go into that environment completely ill equipped. They either keep their mouth shut and hide, or if they open their mouth, they are getting bullied anyway and targeted. All these kids—their anxiety levels are through the roof, and they are not going to talk as well. It is very hard for them to reach out and talk, because they do not know the way they feel—they just do not know how to process it. They are not educated on how to process it. We spoke to some young people recently, and we have got an idea of what is going on in the cult itself at the moment. They have their twenty-firsts on the one night, because they do not want people having twenty-first parties and stuff like that outside, so they just, like, have five or six kids have their twenty-firsts on the one night. It is a really average affair. But I was contacted by some people in there, and they were quite distressed because the cult leader that night gave a talk about how there were no mental health issues in the church—that it does not exist. And then he went around and forced all the young girls to mention in their speeches that the cult, for young people, was the reason why they did not have mental health issues. All those kids have issues; all those kids are suffering. Every kid in there suffers. So they do not even acknowledge it exists, you know. It is heartless the way it is. So these kids at schools—they are just isolated; they are struggling. I know; I went through that. I speak to so many of my friends that have escaped and ex-members—a cult kid at a school would never want to have those days back again.

**John LISTER:** Thank you for sharing that. I really appreciate it.

**The CHAIR:** Annabelle.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Thank you, Catherine and Ryan. I listen to the podcast, and I admire your relationship as well, actually. It is very beautiful. I guess I am just kind of chipping along at some supplementary questions to those of my colleagues. You mentioned about support within maybe government agencies, in response to Ella's question, and I was thinking about how financial independence is one of the big challenges. Do you see it being like a Centrelink worker, for instance, having a specialist understanding around cults or something so that maybe there are some exemptions around your –

**Ryan CAREY:** Yes.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** How would that work? How do we support people to get that financial independence?

**Ryan CAREY:** If a woman is getting out of a domestic violence situation, I believe in Victoria there are extra payments and there is housing and all that sort of made, which is brilliant. We find it a bit easier to get women that have domestic violence situations out, but for young people it is difficult because they will need extra money and extra finances. Their financial literacy might not be great. Their education level, especially if they are female, might be very low. So there needs to be a system in Centrelink where somebody can say, 'Hey, I'm escaping this place. I need to escape. I can't be there anymore.' They will need extra payments. I think it is Orange Door for domestic violence—a set-up like that for kids escaping this would be just incredible. That would do a world of good, really, because it is a domestic violence situation but it does not look like your normal domestic violence situation. Then there are the domestic violence situations in there that do look like domestic violence situations that have that added layer of having a cult on top of that. So even some of these domestic violence organisations—to even be further educated on that cult layer to it too. So yes, they need extra payments, they need extra support.

**Catherine CAREY:** Obviously you are not going to be able to train everyone, but to be able to have people trained in each office that they have, if someone comes in and says, 'I'm in a group-based coercion situation, I

cannot live at home anymore,' they can say, 'All right, you can talk to this person. They're correctly trained in the area. They can understand why you can't live at home and why you can't approach your parents and say, "Just sign this form saying I can't live at home anymore.'" And then they can get their payments from the government in order to not live at home, because that was the situation we mentioned earlier—the young girl that was told, 'Well, they're not hitting you, they're not abusive in' –

**Ryan CAREY:** 'They're not taking drugs.'

**Catherine CAREY:** 'the sense that we all know common abuse occurs.' But she could only live in the home if she attended the meetings and she was not willing to do that anymore, so they said, 'You will have to leave'. Then Centrelink said, 'Well, I'm really sorry, but you can't. Unless they sign the forms, we can't give you any money.'

**Ryan CAREY:** 'You'll have to go back.'

**Catherine CAREY:** 'You'll have to go home.' It took a long time for her as well, so that was an issue. She has got the payments now, which is really good. But the time and mental effort it took for her to get to that—she could not even apply for it. She did not have the mental strength to apply for it to be backdated; she just accepted it from when it was. So I think if they have the documentation to be able to say, 'These behaviours are illegal in Victoria, this group is perpetrating them to this individual; we're able to give you your payments even though you are under the age that'—I am not sure if it is 21 or 25, what the age is that living with your parents

**Ryan CAREY:** Also, a lot of these kids—their rates of CPTSD are massive. All of my friends that have gone through this have it, and that is a really difficult way to live your life. It would be great to get some really good studies into that, but the strike rate is nearly 100% with the people that I know that escaped, that had grown up into it. So you have got kids that have the added problem with the CPTSD, and it also bleeds on to autoimmune issues. A lot of these kids, we are seeing an alarming rate of gastrointestinal issues, rashes, just all these other severe autoimmune—which means they cannot work. They need help to get them to work. We are aware of a girl that has escaped in the past week. She was bedridden with PCOS and other autoimmune issues, and it is amazing—taking her out of the stresses of that environment, she is out of bed vacuuming the house. So this stress comes out in other ways, and it –

**Catherine CAREY:** The body keeps score.

**Ryan CAREY:** The body keeps score. And you are seeing it—yes, they need help.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Yes, financial. On the support of and protection of children, are pastors and leaders required to have a working with children check?

**Catherine CAREY:** Where we were, you were required to have a working with children card for working in the Sunday school and doing childminding. As far as I am aware, that is the only thing. I do not believe the youngies leaders—youngies is from age 14 to 30. Technically, everyone there over the age of 18 should have had a working with children card, because they are interacting with children.

**Ryan CAREY:** I do not see that –

**The CHAIR:** Sorry to interrupt. We are going to have to briefly adjourn the hearing because I think we need to evacuate the building. We have just got an emergency alarm going off at the moment, so we will adjourn briefly and recommence when we are able to.

We will now resume our public hearings for the Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry. Just prior to our break Annabelle Cleeland had asked Catherine and Ryan Carey a question, and I will just ask Annabelle to repeat that question. Thank you, Annabelle.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Thank you, Ella. I just was interested to understand the protections for children and how we can strengthen those, particularly around the working with children checks and cards, and whether they are a requirement. Were they instated by the church themselves, or are they something that you see as an area where we should improve?

**Ryan CAREY:** It was a forced requirement. There was an incident at the hall—they had set up a separate creche during the meetings offsite, and they were actually raided by child safe. So then they were forced to have working with children checks really. The problem with working with children checks is the paedophile that was operating as a Sunday school teacher in the cult had a working with children check. I refer to them as ‘I haven’t been caught yet’ checks really. So they were waving this around that they were safe, but they were not. Unless you have policies and systems like a ‘never alone with a child’ policy, Sunday school classes that can be seen into—just correct procedures that other schools and workplaces have around children, which I believe will probably be expanded after the last incident with childcare workers. But they were a state within a state. They thought their authority was higher than the law of the land. So, yes, they had these checks, but they were unsafe for kids. It was quite common that a young adult or a teenager or a kid would be in a room with one elder.

**Catherine CAREY:** Or any adult.

**Ryan CAREY:** Or any adult. My nephew was put in a situation in which he was asked questions of a sexual nature at 14 by the leader himself, one on one. It was of a sexual nature, which disturbed this guy. That was a common practice as well. There were a lot of one-on-ones with these leaders. These leaders think they are the oracle of God, too, so they did not care about having them in these situations, one on one. It was quite often that you would be pulled out and just absolutely yelled at or reamed at a Youngies, and it would be one on one. So anything psychologically damaging could happen in those environments. A working with children check is just a bandaid. It is not a solution, and it is not a really good effect. It is like a bandaid on an amputee. It is just a token on something that is far greater. Unless they have policies, systems, auditing of a robust nature and education—these places need to be educated on what is safe practice around children and young adults.

**Catherine CAREY:** They also have—only just recently, we have been made aware—child safe policies that they have started publicising to the people who are working in the Sunday school and with the childminding as well. But we have been made aware that they are not following the childminding policies. They are having people do it one on one, not two adults in the room. We have raised previously with the federal government—as it is an overarching body on child safe policies, and the states have to sort of manage—that no-one checks the policies. So it is not until there is an incident that they are asked to produce their policies. We have raised that with the federal government—it is only a reactive system, not proactive. If places were required to submit their child safe policies to a register to be checked and ensure that they are all compliant, that would make a big difference as well, instead of waiting until an incident occurs—or in some of these cases they are not reported at all. So until it is actually discovered, no-one knows what their child safe policies are like. Also, no-one knows if they just made them up after the incident and backdated them as well.

**Ryan CAREY:** These places are incredibly unsafe for kids. You have listened to the podcast. There were elders instructed to go around and give physical punishment to kids, especially if there was a single mother. That was quite regularly happening. If you were in Sunday school or childminding, you could hit kids. It was absolutely disastrous. I speak to adults now that are still traumatised by sleeping in the hall. We used to all sleep on the floorboards of the hall. There was one childminding lady that would hit and even stand on kids in that environment—physically stand on kids. They did not allow for the damage that was done. They did not care. They did not even acknowledge that these practices of hitting kids and treating kids this way was causing irreparable damage to children. When the people at the front were giving talks, Noel would give talks about ‘Kids are to be seen and not heard’ and ‘Spare the rod, spoil the child.’ I never heard in that place to love, listen to or care about your child’s mental wellbeing. Until I left, I only heard ‘Spare the rod, spoil the child’ and ‘A child is to be seen and not heard.’ I was told that I had to crush my kids’ will by the time they were three to make them compliant and soft.

**Catherine CAREY:** It was referred to like breaking in a horse. In that sort of way, you have to break your child.

**Ryan CAREY:** They are the most unsafe places for kids to be in, these environments. That is why there needs to be oversight. There needs to be regulation. There needs to be education: ‘Hey, this is the damage you are causing these people—irreparable damage for later in life.’

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** The paedophile that you mentioned, was that a convicted paedophile?

**Ryan CAREY:** Yes.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** And was he able to work with children?

**Catherine CAREY:** No, he was not –

**Ryan CAREY:** Sorry. He was not known as a paedophile until he handed himself in to police. Yes, he had a working with children check, but he just had not been caught yet. He was one of the Sunday school teachers as well. For the majority of his life he was a Sunday school teacher there. He was convicted last year of molesting nine kids in the Geelong community. The parents that found out reported it to the cult leader—and this was in the judgement—instead of going to police. There was like a 2½-day lag where this guy was able to destroy evidence—I think it was 12 terabytes of child pornography—because the parents did not do the right thing and go and report this guy to the police.

**Catherine CAREY:** The cult leader did not go to police either until he knew that the man had already handed himself in to police. That is when he rang. During this time he had a child in his care. He knew of the abuse that occurred, and he left that man in a house with his child.

**Ryan CAREY:** So yes, they have got working with children cards. It means nothing unless there are policies and education in place to stop that stuff happening.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** I am also interested to understand—we spoke earlier about how hard you were working but also your financial commitment that you were expected to give to the church. Are there any receipts? Is there any sort of proof of that? Also, do you have some understanding of how—are there charity laws that are kind of shielding GRC from scrutiny?

**Catherine CAREY:** They often would say you could ask for a receipt. I do not know anyone who ever did.

**Ryan CAREY:** There were some.

**Catherine CAREY:** The only time you got receipts was for camp payments so that you could say, ‘Yes, I’ve paid my camp fees.’ I mean, in theory. It was the same as you could look at the books if you came and asked for it. I do not know anyone who came and asked for it that was actually—at all.

**Ryan CAREY:** Because if you did ask too many questions, you would be called a busybody. It was ‘curiosity killed the cat’. You can ask questions, but there was so much ‘Why are you doing this?’ There was coercion. You would not. You put yourself in danger if you did. I was in the era when it was not direct debited—I think I touched on it before. Now it is in the era of direct debit there is tracking and stuff like that, which worries me, which I touched on with Rachel before.

**Catherine CAREY:** But because the threshold for having to report your financial statements is so high—I think it is around the \$3 million –

**Ryan CAREY:** \$3.5 million.

**Catherine CAREY:** \$3.5 million mark—if you are taking in under that amount, you do not actually have to do a financial statement. You just have to put in a yearly report saying who is in the organisation, how many employees, how many volunteers—that is it. Because there is no actual need for them to track or account for where their money is going, they do not have to other than what they want to do. Also, because each affiliated group from the Geelong Revival Centre is their own entity and a lot of this is in cash, they can move the money around.

**Ryan CAREY:** They do not set themselves up as a place of worship, they set themselves up as a not-for-profit charity. This seems to be across the board with a lot of cults. The modus operandi is: set yourself up as a not-for-profit charity. All they have to do to get that status is put on the form ‘furthering religion’.

**Catherine CAREY:** Or ‘helping young people become good citizens’, which is I believe what ours says.

**Ryan CAREY:** As far as furthering religion goes, we were only furthering our religion. We hated every other religion out there and spoke horribly. We were antisemitic towards the Jews. We were really disgusting towards the Muslim community.

**Catherine CAREY:** Islamophobic.

**Ryan CAREY:** We were Islamophobic. We were antisemitic. We hated every other religion out there, yet on the form it was ‘furthering religion’, which was a joke. And then underneath that was ‘helping young people to be successful or good law-abiding citizens’. I have CPTSD from what that place did to me. A lot of my friends have that issue or other issues. They were not helping me to be a good citizen, they were destroying us. And it hurts. It hurts that they got this tax-free status, the government did not look into it and they got this leg-up to aid the damage they are doing in the community really.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** So how is GRC avoiding the scrutiny to remain under that \$3.5 million threshold?

**Catherine CAREY:** I think it is –

**Ryan CAREY:** Each entity sets itself up as a different non-for-profit. So we have 30-something branches, and it is very easy if you maybe breach that limit to shift it over to another completely different entity. The money could be shifted across. That needs to be looked into.

**Catherine CAREY:** I think the Australia-wide regulatory body does not have either the capability or the actual tools to be able to investigate. People have made reports; people have been making reports for years about this, and there has been no investigation that we are aware of into anything that happens in that situation. I think because no-one has ever been able to investigate them or find what they are supposed to do—I mean, if you have a business, it is a very low sum that you have to make and you have to put in a BAS every quarter. So even just making them account for where their money is going and doing an annual—our business definitely does not make \$3.5 million a year, and we still have to put in a BAS every quarter. And your tax return—every person who earns over I think it is around \$18,000 has to put in a tax return. So if the threshold was far lower, that would mean that a lot of where the money is going could be traced a lot easier.

**Ryan CAREY:** We have put complaints in to ASIC—we have seen anomalies—and we have just hit dead air. We do not even get a response.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Would you share those complaints?

**Catherine CAREY:** Definitely, yes.

**Ryan CAREY:** There is one recently that we got, yes—and, like, obvious stuff going on, and it is just dead air. No even acknowledgement we sent the email—nothing.

**Catherine CAREY:** Or just a generic ‘Thank you for your submission’.

**Ryan CAREY:** Yes, no further follow up. Whether or not they are they are snowed under I do not know. One, we do not want to damage the good players in the space—those that generally do some great work—but it is a matter of accountability really.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** So, just finally—I will share—there is a financial contribution. Are there assets? Does someone ever hand over—I understand there could have been a farm transacted.

**Ryan CAREY:** Yes. I know of a house and a few other assets. There is pressure on people to put assets into wills for the cult itself. I am aware of the house, and I am aware of –

**Catherine CAREY:** Or the proceeds—not the actual deed but the proceeds of the sale.

**Ryan CAREY:** And I am aware of other situations where I have spoken to people from other cults like ours that there was always pressure. I have heard of people from other cults that—you know, a person is dying, so the leadership will get in there and pressure that individual to virtually donate a large portion or all of their estate over.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I would like to follow on from a couple of Annabelle's questions. You are also welcome to take these on notice, because I think they are both areas of great interest to the Committee. Firstly, on child care and childminding arrangements, is there anything else that you would like to add around either formal or informal child care or childminding arrangements at the GRC? If you would like to reflect on that and take that on notice, you would be welcome to as well, or you could answer it now.

**Catherine CAREY:** Yes, we might take that one on notice.

**Ryan CAREY:** There needs to be a complete framework and people to actually look into it. So yes, we will take that on notice.

**The CHAIR:** I think the Committee would be interested to better understand and have an overview of the different types of child care and childminding arrangements and, in your experience, what kind of regulation there was, what kind of regulation was enforced or not enforced and any suggestions or areas of improvement.

**Ryan CAREY:** Yes, we will take that on notice, because we can go into a lot of detail on that.

**Catherine CAREY:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Great. Secondly, on Annabelle's questions around the finances and charity laws, I think we would be interested to know how the Victorian Government or even how the federal government could strengthen these laws to prevent people from suffering.

**Catherine CAREY:** I think we will take that one on notice. There is a lot of detail that we can probably go into for that one.

**The CHAIR:** Great. You mentioned earlier that you would spend all Sunday at the church. Are you able to take us through that—what that would look like and what people would be doing during the day?

**Ryan CAREY:** You would get up in the morning and make breakfast. You would make your lunch as well, because you would eat at the hall itself.

**Catherine CAREY:** I would make it, because all household duties are the woman's responsibility in that situation. So I would make all the lunches.

**Ryan CAREY:** I am very sorry.

**Catherine CAREY:** I would make the lunches. I would get the kids ready. You dress quite formally, so your kids are also dressed quite formally. You were spoken about—it is like going to visit the Queen. You want to look your best. Every Sunday we would go early to the meeting. The kids would go into the Sunday school hall or childminding, depending on their age, where there were maybe a hundred kids or so coming in intermittently and being supervised by whichever Sunday school teachers were there. So maybe one or two people were supervising that whole room of kids. You would go in and get your seat in the meeting. You would sing choruses for 15 minutes, then you would sing a hymn, then there would be announcements –

**Ryan CAREY:** Yes, and then there would –

**Catherine CAREY:** Then another hymn for tithing—so when you would put your 10% in—then testimonies, so talking about things that the Lord had done in your life, and there would be maybe four or five of those. Then we would –

**Ryan CAREY:** Yes.

**Catherine CAREY:** Did you want to –

**Ryan CAREY:** Then you would have the main talk that would go for about 45 minutes to an hour, which was always sort of hot and heavy. There was all sorts of stuff in that talk. Then you would have your communion, and then they would do what is called the gifts and tongues prophecy, when people would speak in tongues. It was quite a confronting experience as a young person. Tongues and prophecy would go for

another half an hour, and then there would be a prayer line for healing and faith healing. If anyone had problems, there would be this prayer line. Faith healing was put above the medical establishment. That was what you had to go to. You should trust that more than you trusted anything else. In my experience with it, it was not effective. You would have that line where people would virtually go out and there could be a spiritual or a physical problem. Spiritual I think was mainly your mental health, but they did not really describe it that way. So people would be going out for prayer to fix their mental health, which was not effective, because the place was causing it. Then you would adjourn for lunch. Then there was a whole separate meeting each week for recruitment. They called it a salvation meeting but it was just a recruitment meeting, and it was set up for that. All the kids were in that meeting as well. There was a lot of stuff about doomsday prophecy, end times stuff and weird conspiracy theories in British Israelism and stuff like that as well.

**Catherine CAREY:** Pyramids.

**Ryan CAREY:** Pyramids. Some of the stuff said was confronting. In all these meetings they had some really homophobic stuff as well that was preached. You were encouraged never to miss a meeting, and you worried that if you missed too many you would get kicked out. You were encouraged that that was the most important place to be. You could not have a job where you would miss meetings, because you just could not do that. There was this requirement. It was policed too. They would always be checking attendance and who was there. They would have a guy at the back just checking. There were roles in the Sunday school as well, so you were encouraged to do a role in the Sunday school. If your kid missed too many meetings, then that was passed up the ladder to the elders and pastor, and then that was made note of and that person would have a visit from an elder or a pastor to see, if they had missed a week or two weeks of meetings as well, what was going on. So it was surveilled. Then there were Wednesday nights. Young people's was virtually your whole Saturday night. That was designed so we would not socialise with people outside the group itself. But the young people's group was damaging. I know recently there have been talks given where the leader has got up there and said women are to be an ornament to their husbands. That is great for a young person to hear, isn't it? All sorts of stuff happened in those meetings. Then there were camps. Camps went for two or three weeks. It was a big time commitment.

**The CHAIR:** Yesterday there was some reporting in the *Geelong Advertiser* of alleged child sexual abuse at the GRC. The GRC has maintained that there is no legal basis for establishing liability, even if the abuse occurred. Do you think they should be liable?

**Catherine CAREY:** Yes.

**Ryan CAREY:** Yes.

**Catherine CAREY:** The understanding we have of how the situation has been worded—it sounds like the offences occurred at a time when elders were sent to someone's house to discipline the children, which is a well-established thing that used to happen to many single mums. So they were there under the guide of the Geelong Revival Centre. They were not there on their own merits, by the sound of things. They were not just invited there and it just happened to happen; this was done.

**Ryan CAREY:** It has still got to go through the legal process and be sorted out. It is still going to get harder scrutiny. But I think if that place is found out—in this situation it has to be found out if it did or did not occur. But I speak to victims quite regularly of sexual abuse that was covered up and reported to the ministry over decades, and it was never handled correctly. It was like—they police themselves. They are not answering to police, they are answering to the leadership. And the leadership is trying to keep the perfect image of the church for the outside world—that this is a place of safety, where it is not. So yes, I think they should be liable, because they answer to these men rather than answer to authority and no-one was encouraged to go and report it to police. They would give a scripture about 'You do not take your brother to law.' But it was a manipulated thing. Everything was in-house. So yes, I believe they should be liable, because maybe if they were not in that situation and that abuse happened they would have gone to police or gone to the proper authorities. And there is Victims of Crime—there is all sorts of compensation that these people do not get because they do not go to the proper authorities.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** And there are no consequences.



**Catherine CAREY:** No. There has been a practice we have heard of that occasionally the perpetrator would be put out of fellowship but the victim would be as well so that they could not tell people what had occurred. There is generational abuse that has occurred, so people have been abused and then they therefore after have become an abuser themselves as well. So if it had been handled correctly at the start, not only would you have avoided all the initial person's victims, you would have avoided the follow-up victims as well.

**Ryan CAREY:** I know of girls who, when they were 12—I have spoken to them; they are adults now—were blamed for their own abuse by adults. I spoke to one person who was molested by her stepfather, and the ministry virtually accused her of leading the stepfather on. It is horrendous—a 12-year-old. I sat in talks, and I now reflect back on him, where he would be saying—you know, the girls were always seen as the flirts and the ones that were leading the men astray. It was never the male's fault, which is just horrible. I listened to my cult leader talk about 12-year-olds being precocious and flirty and stuff like that, and then I got out and I realised that there were kids around that age getting molested and they were being virtually blamed for what happened. They are 12-year-olds; they are not responsible for that. The horror of their attitude towards young women and girls was just disgusting, really—just off the charts.

**The CHAIR:** Christine.

**Chris COUZENS:** Yes, I just have a couple of quick ones I picked up from what you were saying earlier. In terms of medical treatment, you were saying you had to pray rather than go and get medical support. Were there deaths that you know of as a result of that?

**Ryan CAREY:** Yes, there were.

**Chris COUZENS:** Yes. Okay.

**Ryan CAREY:** We joke about it, people that escape, that we have a really high pain threshold because our parents would not use Panadol or anything like that. They would just pray about it. Some of us had broken bones. Quite often you hear stories about friends that had broken bones for a couple of days before their parents finally went into the hospital and got help. But yes, there have been deaths even recently where they have left it too late to even go into the hospital. I know of one lady who had left her run too late. I had a close friend who was so indoctrinated that he believed that God would heal him of his cancer, and he passed away. I still find that painful to this day, to look back at a friend that had everything going for him but was so indoctrinated. He was brought up in that situation.

**Catherine CAREY:** And it was a very treatable cancer.

**Ryan CAREY:** It was a treatable cancer. He just died a horrible death, and that happened in there quite regularly.

**Catherine CAREY:** Also, the fallout from that is that, even now, if you are sick or something like that, you do not think to go to the doctor, because you just go, 'It'll be all right.' Our daughter said, 'You know, I think I need to go to the doctor about something,' and I was like, 'Yeah, you're all right.' And then I went, 'Wait, hang on—she probably does.' You are almost not even thinking to use the medical profession, which I am sure is the same for a lot of people. It is not a default thought that something is wrong medically: 'I need to go and see someone about that.'

**Ryan CAREY:** Even medical help for mental health issues. What really forced me out the door is I watched a situation where a person was manic—was suffering psychosis, needed help, needed community and support put around them. She was a really caring, beautiful person. She had a child, so obviously it flared up—she had a history of it. She was removed from the group because of her mental illness. She was suffering psychosis, so she was kicked out of the group. She was told she was not allowed to tell people what had happened. She was not allowed back until she was off her medication. It was a spiral that was happening consistently. And it was not just her; this was a regular spiral where there was this loop: a manic situation happens, person loses the plot, gets kicked out, goes and seeks help, gets guilty for even seeking help—really guilty. They are told, a lot of them, that they have let the devil in and they are the cause of their own mental illness, which is garbage. It is criminal to say that to somebody. They get better. They feel guilty for being on the medication. They get off the medication, they get back in, they spiral out of control again, and so on and so on and so on. These places draw people that are broken, so there is a high incidence of depression and all sorts of mental illnesses in these

places, because these people are trying to fix themselves. Somebody has told them they have got this magical cure, which it is not. The pastor would get up there and virtually say that these medical professions do not know what they are talking about. God is the great physician, yet there were so many people in there suffering because they were not getting the proper help. And they are programmed to suffer as well. They are not programmed to enjoy this life. You have got to suffer through it in hopes that your reward in the next life is better. We have got no guarantee of that. So they just are programmed to cop this abuse.

**Chris COUZENS:** Just quickly on another one: how many people are actually employed? Just the one. And is that the leader?

**Catherine CAREY:** Yes.

**Chris COUZENS:** So the elders were all voluntary.

**Ryan CAREY:** They were all voluntary, yes.

**Chris COUZENS:** Yes. Okay. So there has only ever been one employee.

**Ryan CAREY:** One. Yes. And it is a shame –

**Catherine CAREY:** That is official. We are not sure if there have been –

**Cindy McLEISH:** How much were they paid?

**Ryan CAREY:** I had this conversation with another mate of mine whose father was in ministry, who is not in ministry anymore. These guys went out and did the work of the church. Yes, they might have got reimbursements while they were doing that, but they have given their life to all this work—and that is a lot of unpaid work they are doing—and the cult is raking in the cash. They can afford to get paid, but there is no super off that and there is no reimbursement, so when they get to later life, they have donated all this time and effort and what are they going to get for it? They could even get kicked out too.

**Chris COUZENS:** Would the elders have employment somewhere else?

**Ryan CAREY:** Yes. My dad was a plant operator. He drove excavators and stuff like that. It was hard growing up because Dad was out most nights of the week when I needed a father. He was out working. He was also sent to all different locations all over the globe. At the start we were just dumped with random families, and one of those incidents caused me irreparable damage. And I saw that happening to other kids. We talk about it—I know kids that were sexually abused in those situations and stuff like that. Kids were this disposable object in their –

**Catherine CAREY:** Or a distraction.

**Ryan CAREY:** Or a distraction. Yes, not safe for kids.

**Chris COUZENS:** Thank you.

**Ryan CAREY:** That is all right.

**The CHAIR:** One final question from me: what outcomes would you like to see the Victorian Government achieve from the Committee's inquiry?

**Catherine CAREY:** We have gone into quite a great amount of detail in the group submission. The legal changes we are proposing in that are to introduce a definition of group-based coercive control, fund specialist trauma services for affected individuals, to develop new civil and regulatory tools to address coercive patterns before actual criminal thresholds are reached—there would be a tiered system for that—and to improve interagency coordination and oversight. That would be what we would be hoping for. It goes into a lot more detail, but that is just to give it to you in a nutshell.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Can I ask two questions on notice?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** I have got two questions on notice and a clarification. Of the 30 branches and the pastors at that level, is there anyone above those?

**Ryan CAREY:** The main guy would sit in Geelong. The main guy of the cult previously was Noel Hollins. Now the new guy that has taken over is Brian Griggs. He is the main head honcho of the whole organisation now.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Okay. My two questions on notice are—if you could just respond when you have time. One of our huge challenges that we are going to have to battle with is: how do you legislate some form of consequence or punishment to a pastor when a lot of the work has been executed by the elders and other people? I just think if you have got any guidance on how you go to the top—and not necessarily by punishing, because a lot of them are parents and in relationships, and I understand that will restrict people from –

**Catherine CAREY:** Yes, that is something we have thought about. We will take that on notice, but we do have the answers for that one.

**Ryan CAREY:** That is in the group submission, yes.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Great. Thank you, Ryan. Another one is just you mentioned earlier AOD, alcohol and other drug, counselling and support associated with cults. If you have got any evidence associated to that and groups and guidance on why we have seen religious cults branch out into AOD, that would be really informative.

**Ryan CAREY:** Yes, I will take that on notice. There is a lot.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Catherine and Ryan, is there anything else that you would like to add today before we finish?

**Ryan CAREY:** No. I am really happy with this process. I believe we can make a difference. We have got to stop this from happening, really. But, yes, I have confidence that we can go forward. Thank you, guys, for sitting through the first of many arduous verbal submissions.

**Catherine CAREY:** I think also the Victorian Government has never shied away from making decisions that might seem too tough for someone else. I know based on the conversion practices law the Victorian Government's is the gold standard and is the best one out of all the states that has been developed, and Victoria has said, 'We won't shy away from this.' Other states have a slightly more watered-down system that means it is still able to be practised in a certain situation. I think that for the Victorian Government to pick this up, I do not think we could have had a better state offer to look into it. And thank you for your time very much.

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

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for appearing before the Committee today and for your contribution to this inquiry. We greatly appreciate the time and effort taken to prepare your evidence, and we really do acknowledge the significance of your testimony here today. You will be provided with a proof version of today's transcript to check together with any questions taken on notice. Verified transcripts and responses to any questions taken on notice will then be published on the Committee's website. I declare this meeting adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**