TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne – Wednesday 23 July 2025

MEMBERS

Ella George – Chair Cindy McLeish
Annabelle Cleeland – Deputy Chair Jackson Taylor
Chris Couzens Rachel Westaway
John Lister

WITNESS

Name withheld.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. My name is Ella George, and I am the Chair of the Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee. I open this meeting of the Committee about its Inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and organised fringe groups.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting, the Wurundjeri Woiwurung 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 this country.

I am joined today by my Committee Members: Annabelle Cleeland, the Member for Euroa and Deputy Chair; Cindy McLeish, the Member for Eildon; Christine Couzens, the Member for Geelong; Rachel Westaway, the Member for Prahran; and John Lister, the Member for Werribee.

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, I invite you to begin by sharing your experience and then we will have some questions from Members. Thank you.

WITNESS: Thank you, everybody. I appreciate the opportunity to speak, and I am amazed, pleasantly amazed, that this is actually happening, because I never quite thought this amount of attention would be focused on this issue and on the area of Geelong and on the group that I was involved in. I think it is a huge step forward just to be where we are today.

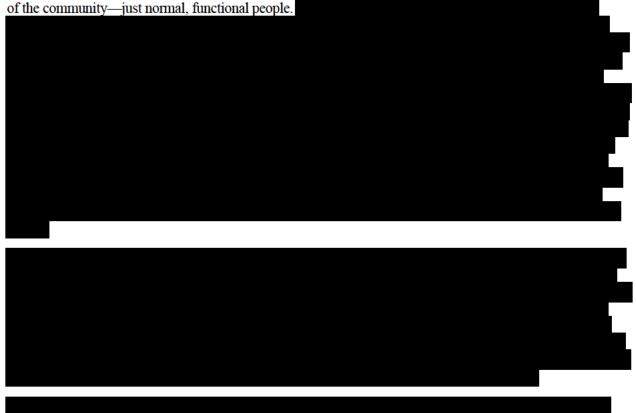


My experience with it from the early days, it was just something that we did on the weekends that other families did not do. I always knew there was something a little bit different with us compared to my peers in school. Nobody else I went to school with went to the same church, and there were very few people in my community that also went to the same church, because it was based in Norlane. I just always sort of separated it as like, 'Oh, this is what we do on the weekend', sometimes on Saturdays, sometimes on Wednesdays, sometimes, you know, on all the different schedules. I just accepted very early on that we were different from the rest of the community, and that sort of helped compartmentalise some of the stories and strange things that I was hearing about in the church compared to what I was learning in school and seeing in my peers' lives.

The sort of pieces of the teachings that stick in your mind later on is that the world—we are sort of taught as early as we can process it that the world is going to end. World War III not just might happen, but it is going to happen any minute, any day now, and you do not know when it is going to happen, so you need to be constantly prepared and right with God in order to be saved and go to heaven. The fixation on Armageddon and World War III and the world ending and you needing to be right with God, which is defined by being in fellowship in the assembly, was just sort of really drummed into you. You learned about it at the same time as you were learning about maths and spelling and trees and whatever, so it was part of your understanding of the world just as much as you understood other parts.

Then it was not until I got to, you know, older, in my teen years maybe, where I started to sort of see, 'Okay, well, these teachings of the church don't really align with what I am seeing in the world and in the news—it doesn't seem like the world is about to end, it doesn't seem like World War III is about to happen.' I had started to find it odd that people in the church and the group were actually very hopeful and excited about the world ending. Like, when they talked about Armageddon, it was as something that we should be looking forward to because that meant this horrible world is ending and we will have our chosen place next to God as rulers and leaders over the unsaved. It was this sort of very visceral, visual teaching about what that would look like. And that was really the—you were only supposed to have your eyes on that prize, so nothing in the world, nothing in your schooling, nothing in your sports, nothing in your relationships was as important as you being saved and you being prepared for Armageddon and to be taken up to heaven.

One of the other earliest memories—I remember when the Waco siege happened, which I think was in the late 80s. I was young, I was 12 or 13 at the time or something, and I just remember seeing parallels between the way that I was understanding how that group worked and some of their teachings and what was happening in our organisation. I did not think they were as extreme, but I could just see similarities in the group structure and some of the teachings, in the ways that the people were just convinced to do things that were totally against their own, you know, physical wellbeing. I thought I could actually see something like this happening in the Geelong Revival Centre, which is a crazy thought, because this was something happening in America, and it was this really wild story. I just thought that there was so much control in this organisation. I would have been 80% confident that if Noel had said, 'We are all going to come to the hall this weekend and drink a special drink' that at least half the people would have done it, no questions asked, including my parents, because I could see that they just had this ability to switch on and switch off or compartmentalise their view on life and the world. For the regular world, which was Monday to Friday, they were businesspeople, successful members





So you were sort of stuck in this religious gridlock essentially, or moral gridlock of, 'Okay, I can see these things are wrong and challenging and hurting my family and hurting the community and I can tell this group is not a healthy, functional group, but I can't question it and I can't challenge it, because if I pull one little string on it, the whole thing will unravel,

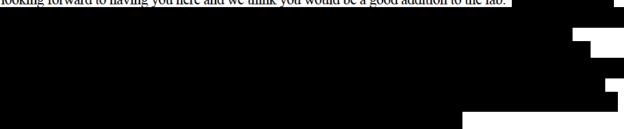
The CHAIR: Please keep going.

WITNESS:				

I knew at that time that it meant that I would have to leave home and that I would be disowned. I had been preparing for that, really, since I was aware of my sexuality, probably 12 or 13. I had just always accepted, because it is so the antithesis of the teachings of the church, that you would be excommunicated, you would have to leave your family, and not just move out and get your own little apartment somewhere; you would be absolutely cut off and shunned and told you are going to hell and told you are a disappointment.

So I had been sort of preparing for all these things to happen, and then it happened exactly as I predicted. I was told that I would be leaving the house. I was given a photo album of all of the good memories of our childhood, I was given letters from my sisters saying goodbye and how much of a disappointment I was and how much I had lied to them about who I was, and then I was given essentially the proposal that I could take a year off from my studies, go around the world and get it out of my system and then come back and keep going in the family

I am very grateful that my professors at the time said, 'Look, come in. We got your letter that you are dropping out. Come in and talk with us. We want to find out what's happening.' I came in in tears and told them the whole story, and they were very supportive and very encouraging and said, 'Well, this is weird.' I had already arranged to do my honours year at CSIRO, at the animal health laboratories, and they were like, 'We're really looking forward to having you here and we think you would be a good addition to the lab.'



I was very interested and passionate about science—I still am—so that really kept me going. The people from CSIRO in Geelong were probably some of the first people outside of the family and my personal network who I really shared any of this stuff happening with—any stuff about the church and coming out and that whole experience. They were really, really supportive and encouraging, and I owe them my career now, because if it had not been for them encouraging me to keep going, I would have dropped out and I would not have the career that I have had now. It is always funny, the people that pop into your life, and you do not expect them to have a major role in how things turn out. I need to think of a way to thank them at some point.



The CHAIR: Thank you, That is great.

WITNESS: That was a bit of a winding story.

Cindy McLEISH: Yes. Thank you. I will just let you know that I have to scoot off just after I ask my questions, so apologies for that.

When did you first start questioning the teachings of the church? You mentioned earlier that at school you noticed your lives were a bit different from other kids at school. Were you questioning it then, or did you just kind of accept it for a while?

WITNESS: I accepted it in the sense that it meant that we were above everybody. We were chosen, and we were told we were above everybody. We were saved and everybody else was unsaved. And so we were –

Cindy McLEISH: Chosen ones.

Then definitely once my sexuality awareness kicked in and I realised that meant I was 100% going to hell and there was absolutely no way that I could have this life similar to what my parents had had, I needed to figure out a completely different journey, and I needed to do it in secret without them, realising that at some point when I did I was going to completely deviate from their chosen path, and that is where they thought I was going to go. I started questioning early high school, and —

Cindy McLEISH: Did you have friends at school?

WITNESS: Did I have friends at school? I had very few. I always have a small number of very close friends, but I never told them about the church at all. For example, in year 7 I got the lead role of the school play, *Sweeney Todd*, which I cannot believe I was confident enough to do, but the rehearsals were on Sundays and I had to immediately drop out of the play because I could not go to rehearsals on Sundays because that was the church day. I had to explain to everybody—I was all excited about auditioning for this role, and I got the

role, and it is the year 7 production. I think I just made up a story about why I could not. I think just said, 'My parents are really strict. I can't do it. I have to drop out.' So there was always making excuses.

Cindy McLEISH: So you never spoke to any of your friends, which was what the church wanted: you not to have friends.

WITNESS: True. You were only supposed to have friends in the assembly. I knew there was always something weird and different about it, and I was always a bit embarrassed because it was also so at odds with the image of the rest of my family. It was just a little bit of a shameful secret.

Cindy McLEISH: Do you think your parents had those conflicts at all?

WITNESS: That is a good question.

Cindy McLEISH: Because they were taken in at an impressionable age.

WITNESS: Yes.

Cindy McLEISH: Were things good for them when they joined the church?

WITNESS: I think so. They were always well regarded because they were successful. As I said in the podcast, if you were from a family of means, you definitely had certain privileges and you were allowed to get away with things a lot more than other families were allowed to get away with. I could see very much that we were allowed to do things, go places, have things and wear things—and my mum was allowed to work—that other families were not allowed to do.



Cindy McLEISH: My final question just before I duck out: the proposals that you had with option A and option B—who drafted those? Was that your parents or the church who drafted that?

WITNESS: It was my parents.

Cindy McLEISH: So they could do that separately from it. Do you think they spoke to people?

WITNESS: Yes. It was exactly what the church would have said to do.

Cindy McLEISH: Thank you very much, and I do apologise.

The CHAIR: John.

John LISTER: Thank you for coming in. Something that Cindy just mentioned spurred something in my head around your experience growing up, because we have found through what we have read so far that when people grow up, they are not only vulnerable because they are teenagers and they are already questioning everything and they are developing their own sense of self but they are even more vulnerable because of what they have experienced as kids with the whole family structure. I do want to skip ahead a little bit to what we should be doing and your experience from school. What sorts of reforms could we have in schools to help reduce the chance or impact of indoctrination?

WITNESS: Good question. I really do attribute the quality of my education to understanding what was happening, figuring out how I could leave and figuring out how I could see a different life journey for myself

than my parents had had. I very distinctly remember that one of the biggest breakthroughs I had was actually a religious education class at school. I think it was in year 10. I went to Geelong College for years 7 to 10—and a half—and then I went to Geelong High for the last couple. But I remember we did a religious education class, maybe it was a semester or something, and I just assumed that my parents would take me out of it, because we were not supposed to learn about other religions—'Every other religion is wrong and the devil, and you should not even learn about them.'

I remember that class, which I sort of dreaded, because I thought, 'I'm going to learn about all these satanic, horrible, evil other religions.' I went in preparing not to absorb any of the content, but the classes ended up being just an overview of all the different religions and the history of the religions and the similarities and the differences, and I remember a light-bulb moment of like, 'All these religions are very similar.' If you go back through history, there are a lot of ancient tribes and ancient customs and beliefs—and Indigenous Australians, we touched on all their beliefs. I just remember, again, seeing all these similarities in all these religions and how they are actually not that different. A lot of them have done very terrible things, and a lot of bad things are done in the name of religion, all different religions, but a lot of them have versions of the same stories, just told with a different lens or historical perspective. I remember that really opened my eyes that all the other religions are not wrong—'They are also not that different from ours in terms of their core beliefs; they just package them in a different way.' That was a very helpful, beneficial thing that I was not expecting.

So I think, in terms of what could come out of this, we are maybe not asking for less religious education, we are maybe suggesting more religious education, but in a way that shows you can pick a religion and you can have a religion, but you can be aware that it is not that different to these other people who you have maybe been raised to hate; you probably have a lot of core beliefs with Muslims or Catholics. The origins of these religions are very similar, and they relate to general human development and societal development.





Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you. I would like to ask about your parents and their initial involvement in the church and where they are now. We have heard from several people and understand that often cult-like organisations will prey on people that are more vulnerable. Were there vulnerabilities in your parents that made them join? Was it simply their youth, or were there other issues that made them so committed to it for such a long period of time over the course of losing a child and then, in a way, almost losing their other son? And now you have come back together. I am keen to understand what it was that you believe made them a target and then what got them out of it. Was it the book? What is it that made them see the light?

WITNESS: Yes—also good questions. In addition to the vulnerability as a way to get people in and keep them in, playing on people's narcissism is another very effective way of doing it. I really see that now, being out of it and having done a lot of therapy and reprocessed a lot of stuff that has come out in the hearings and everything. But because the church teaches that to be in this organisation, that means you are chosen and you are special and you are set aside by God to eventually rule over your peers—and it is not a hypothetical, it is 'when this happens you will be above everybody and you will be in charge of managing the unsaved in heaven or in the thousand years between World War III and when God comes back' or whatever the story is in Revelation. A lot of the teachings are really also designed to scratch certain people's narcissistic tendencies, especially men. A lot of the teachings on men's position in the family, the hierarchical nature of the organisation—'If you do this, you can get to the next level; if you do that, you can get to the next level'—are very much designed to appeal to that personality type.





Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you.

Chris COUZENS: Thanks, for coming in today and for all your advocacy to get us where we are today as well.

WITNESS: I appreciate that.

Chris COUZENS: I just wanted to go back to some of the conversation we had about being a student. You went to—was it GASP?

WITNESS: Yes, it was GASP.

Chris COUZENS: The impact of that—you talked about how your parents' response was to kick you out basically and disown you, but then you had people that supported you.

WITNESS: Yes, I had that connection.



Chris COUZENS: In terms of that support, when you went to GASP, for example, were you talking to them about your situation in the cult or your sexuality?

WITNESS: Yes—both, because they were very intertwined at that point. It was a weird time in my life. You come out and you are like, 'I'm so relieved that this is out'—even though it did not happen the way that I wanted it to. You just have this huge sense of relief that you do not have to hide it anymore. So I was, on one hand, incredibly at peace, because it was out, people knew it, my friends knew, but then I lost my family, I had to drop out of uni and my life could have been over. I was going back and forwards between, like, 'My life is now starting' and then 'My life is over.' So I am super grateful for the support that I had, and I am super grateful for the education that I had, both at college and at Geelong High—excellent schools and excellent teachers. I think probably at Deakin I was a little bit lost. I did not feel like a typical 20-something. I did not feel like I fitted in, I did not feel like I belonged there and I did not really know what I was doing, so I did not

properly make use of all the connections and support that there were. I was still dealing with a lot of shame, and I was just out. There was a gay group at Deakin. I was like, 'Oh, I'm not like those gays. I'm a cool gay.' I did not too much fit in with all of that, but that was just me. Because I was in this church and I was trained not to be part of any group on the outside, it was very hard for me to see myself as being part of another support group or another type of organisation.

Chris COUZENS: It was obviously very traumatic, but what you have been able to achieve is pretty incredible as well.

WITNESS: Thank you. I had a lot of help on the way. Thank you.

Chris COUZENS: Okay. Thank you.

WITNESS: So there were resources, and I have also thought about how you get that information to people who need it, and I do not really know. The internet obviously makes it a lot easier now probably. Even with the Facebook group and with the organisations, I would like to eventually be in a position where I can provide more help to people who are going through it—people that are just leaving university or leaving school or coming out or struggling with something. I do think there needs to be something, and that is probably what GASP, or whatever it is now, is supposed to be—a way to navigate that.

Chris COUZENS: It is still GASP.

WITNESS: Is it? Okay, that is good.

Chris COUZENS: They link in with QHub now too.

WITNESS: Okay. When you are just getting into it, it is a lot to process, and you are like, 'I don't know what applies to me,' but I am sure the internet helps a lot.

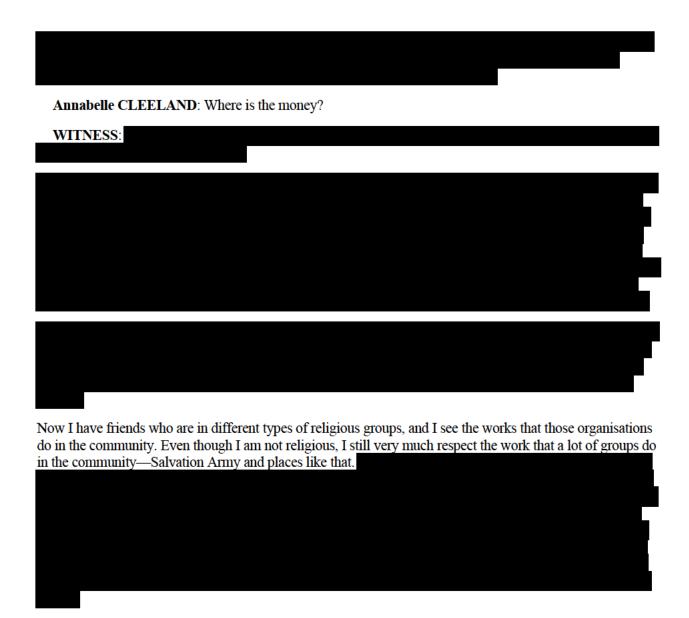
Annabelle CLEELAND: I have a couple of minutes left, so I might ask some questions. If there is something you want to take on notice—and for everyone, just feel free. It is pretty intense, and so tonight or down the track if you have some further answers, feel free to –

WITNESS: Good set-up.

Annabelle CLEELAND: keep giving them to us, because we are so inspired by you. As Christine said, your courage is probably going to protect a lot of people going forward, so we really are grateful. I am interested in, as we discussed a bit earlier, the financial control GRC has over people, and that is quite a loaded question—individuals' and your family's wealth as well—and whether the current laws maybe shield that financial oversight of following the money. Did you want to make a comment on that or take that on notice, or both?

WITNESS: I can do both. I have also spent a bit of time looking at the finances or the way that the groups operate financially, because I have always thought there was a lot of money going through those organisations and very little to be seen in terms of charitable works or even flashy buildings that the churches congregate in or even handouts or donations to members of the congregation who are struggling.

The amount of money going in never matched any of the charitable works that we saw happening, and we just accepted that. We were always told there were overseas works, and the money was needed for overseas works. That was always a bit mysterious, because you never quite saw anything. Obviously you could not question anything—that would show you were lacking faith. Everything was just sort of accepted on faith.



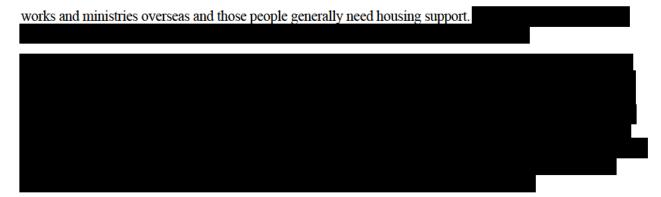
Annabelle CLEELAND: I am conscious Ella has to ask some questions too. If you have further investigations or research or understanding about that financial trail, you can by all means give it to the secretariat as well.

Annabelle CLEELAND: It is more about trying to understand whether there is anything from a legislative perspective that we could scrutinise cults through legislation, and I think financially that trail might allow us to skip, you know, the level of, like, your parents, who may have conducted the work of the cult in some ways and enabled it, but going directly to the pastor or the head person in these positions. We are trying to ask questions to figure out how we can legislate.

WITNESS: Yes. Just more detailed accounting of the spending.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Yes. And the charities.

WITNESS: Yes. I mean, it is not hard to demonstrate your charitable work, whether you are doing a food kitchen or you are doing grants to people who need housing support. I think there are already probably lots of ways to inspect that, but I guess churches and charitable organisations are not required to do that. And then I think they will say, 'Well, a lot of the money is going overseas,' and that is harder to track because there are



Annabelle CLEELAND: My other two questions, which I would love to ask you and maybe have you respond to after, are around the protection of children. Your leaders and elders and pastors required a working with children check. What are the care arrangements? And have you got any insight on how we can prevent any sort of further abuse or enabling of that behaviour?

WITNESS: I do not have too much to say on that because I am not a parent and I left before I guess the working with children concept came in. I do not think any of that was applicable. They were very much seen as: because we are chosen by God, we answer to God, not the government, so what we say is appropriate.

I remember when the evening meeting was happening on Sundays the kids would all sleep on the floor in sleeping bags in the Sunday school. They would move all the Sunday school chairs and all the kids would be lined up in their sleeping bags and then some of the older women would be supervising the children sleeping. There would quite often be beatings if a child was talking or wriggling around too much. You are always afraid of that because they were more the stern older women that were supervising. They had to supervise a bunch of like a hundred kids at 8 o'clock or 9 o'clock in the evening. You would probably have to keep a pretty tight rein.

I remember my brother got dragged out into one of the rooms and was given a beating by one of the women, and I remember just being horrified by that because he was probably talking to me. Then I told my parents about it and they just sort of dismissed it and just said, 'You shouldn't be talking; you shouldn't be causing a fuss'. I am not saying that that was an abusive incident, but he was smacked in a way that was maybe encouraged and appropriate at the time. But I just remember thinking it was a complete overreaction to his crime, which was talking, and my parents would never have smacked us like that for such a minor thing. They were pretty relaxed with the corporal punishment.

Annabelle CLEELAND: My final question, which you can take home with you if possible, is that we have heard a lot of stories about particularly women discouraged from education, discouraged from financial independence and I guess the life skills to potentially physically and mentally leave the cult and how that holds such a coercive control. Just any guidance on the tools to reintegrate to leave but also to reintegrate for individuals that could be 30- or 40- or 50-year-olds that want to but are not in a position to. That is a loaded question.

WITNESS: I will take that on notice. I cannot speak from a married woman's role obviously, but I agree that it is a real relearning. 'Okay, now I have to relearn how to live. I have to forget everything that I have been taught about society and trusting strangers and reaching out for help in the community. Now I will figure out how to do that. I have to mentally get over the hurdle of always being told not to do that, so now I have to be okay with doing it and then figure out how to do it'. And they are sort of two separate things. I can think about that.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Just a few quick questions from me, And again, please feel free to take any on notice. We have heard a lot about groups like the GRC using aspects of a person's identity to increase their control of

that individual. What recommendations should the Committee consider making to the Victorian Government in order to ensure that the impacts of these groups on LGBTIQ+ members are not exacerbated?

WITNESS: That is a tough one, and I am sure it comes up against religious freedom issues as well. I definitely do not think the Geelong Revival Centre is the only organisation or religious group that has a troubled history with members of that community. I do not see that there could be a way that the church would ever accept gay and lesbian people. It would be just an immediate excommunication. You are treated as if you are dead. It is so far from where I think the church is and will ever be. I do not think it is welcoming. When the gay marriage laws passed, I know that they changed their ability to marry people because they did not want to have to marry gay couples. It is water and oil. There will never be acceptance of it. They barely accept women as complete standalone people, let alone a gay person. I cannot really answer that.

The CHAIR: That is okay. There was a report in yesterday's *Geelong Advertiser* about some allegations of child sexual abuse, and the GRC has maintained that there is no legal basis for establishing liability even if the abuse did occur. Generally speaking, and not specifically on this matter, do you think that the GRC should be financially liable where, say, volunteers have been found to have abused children?

WITNESS: Yes, I think the GRC has a very clear duty of care to people in the congregation on many, many things, let alone abuse allegations. That would be the most basic level of a duty of care that I can think of. And if they are aware of abuse claims, I think there definitely needs to be a more established way of handling that that involves some preferably external oversight, some transparency, some accountability. In terms of whether they have a financial obligation, I do not know. I mean, if someone has suffered throughout life because they have had the long-lasting effects of child abuse, there may be a compensation angle. But then again, I do not think the church is sitting on a huge pile of money. I think it is gone.

I think if there have been crimes and abuse has happened and people can get compensation, then they absolutely should be supported to do that, and I am willing to help support that.

The CHAIR: And finally, what outcomes would you like to see the Victorian Government achieve from the Committee's inquiry?

WITNESS: I think education and awareness in a way that is done so it is not immediately threatening and door-closing to people in these situations. I think whatever happens, it will need to be communicated and messaged in a way that will be effective for people who have been trained and maybe brainwashed their whole life to be resistant to those messages. One of the biggest scriptures that was always quoted was 'A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump,' which is one of the big things in the bible. Leaven is yeast, so a little bit of yeast in the lump of bread will make the whole thing rise. That was almost quoted weekly, and it meant that if you allow the tiniest bit of sin, it will leaven the whole lump. For decades we were conditioned that you cannot allow any questioning, any sunlight, any doubt. If you allow your daughter to wear a short skirt, for example, that is enough to then corrupt the whole family. So they have been brainwashed, essentially—I do not like that phrase, but they have been indoctrinated to think that there cannot be a crack, because if there is a crack, the whole thing falls apart. So the messaging needs to be non-confrontational and non-threatening, that we are not taking away your beliefs. That is a hard thing to do, to present things in that way, but I think the direction that everything is going, the educational component, the access to resources, I think it is all wonderful and well needed, and it seems to be well planned.

The CHAIR: Thank you, so much for appearing before the Committee today, and for your evidence. It is incredibly valuable for our inquiry. From here you will be provided with a proof version of today's transcript to check together with any questions that you have taken on notice. Verified transcripts and responses to questions taken on notice—we will have a conversation with you about what you are comfortable with in terms of it being published or being kept confidential. We will adjourn the meeting here.

Witness withdrew.