

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 – Monday 20 October 2025

MEMBERS

Ella George – Chair

Annabelle Cleeland – Deputy Chair

Chris Couzens

John Lister

Cindy McLeish

Jackson Taylor

Rachel Westaway

WITNESS

Elise Heerde.

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's Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups.

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

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

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

Today the committee is holding its third day of hearings for this inquiry, where we continue to gather evidence. I ask the witnesses to keep in mind the terms of reference when providing their evidence today.

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 these 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 Elise Heerde. I thank Elise for her time and interest in participating in this important inquiry.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live. While all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments reported outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

We will now commence this public hearing, and I welcome Elise Heerde. Elise, I invite you to make an opening statement, and this will be followed by questions from members. Thank you.

Elise HEERDE: Thank you. Thank you to the committee for this opportunity to speak and for your work so far in this inquiry.

I am a certified coach, a qualified counsellor and a mental health practitioner based in Melbourne. For the past three years, I have been specialising in religious trauma and cult recovery. I am also the co-founder of the Religious Trauma Collective, who will be presenting to the committee tomorrow. I would like to start by sharing some of my personal experiences inside a high-control, coercive group, and then talk about my professional work in this space, which has been deeply informed by this lived experience.

I spent over 11 years inside Hillsong Church Melbourne, first as a volunteer, then as a staff member and eventually as a campus leader for Hillsong College, Melbourne. Hillsong is a conservative evangelical–Pentecostal megachurch with campuses across the globe, including five in Victoria. And I want to be clear: I am not claiming that Hillsong as a whole is a cult or that it has not had any positive impact on people's lives. Like with many large, high-control institutions, both can be true at once. What we do know, though, is that cults are not always fringe compounds on the edge of society. What defines them is not a label, but the tactics – coercion, control, exploitation and the dismantling of personal freedom.

What became increasingly clear at higher levels of leadership and deeper involvement was the strategic way that Hillsong recruited and retained its members, using coercive techniques framed as spiritual growth and community. I served, I led, and I believed deeply in what I was building. This was a place that promised belonging, purpose and spiritual growth. But behind the lights and language of community and care, I came to see something very different: a high-control system that operated through strategic coercion and manipulation. At Hillsong recruitment was not random; it was deliberate, structured and highly systemised. Volunteers were

trained to identify and engage newcomers quickly, to collect their details and guide them through a defined pathway, from attending services to quickly joining volunteer teams, joining small groups with the ultimate goal of getting them to commit to Hillsong as their spiritual home within the first few months.

Many volunteers participated in this process with genuine care and good intentions, believing they were helping people to find belonging and faith. However, the process itself operated as a coercive recruitment strategy. Love bombing was very common, using excessive warmth and deeply spiritual language to build rapid attachment, loyalty and dependence. What appeared to be connection and community was in practice a structured assimilation model, where belonging became conditional on service, giving and compliance. Inside the system obedience was framed as faith, and questioning leadership was treated as if you were questioning God himself. Those who complied were celebrated, while those who slowed down or spoke up were sidelined or labelled as divisive. It was psychological conditioning that left people anxious, ashamed and terrified of losing belonging.

Control began early. Children were taught that obedience to leaders and any adults within the church was expected, and to question an adult was rebellion. As teens, the conditioning deepened. Youth programs reinforced sexuality and gender stereotypes, girls told to dress modestly to protect men and boys told to lead and suppress desire. Those who struggled with sexuality or mental health were often shamed, prayed over or sent to accountability meetings instead of being supported, affirmed and safely cared for. These ministries were mostly led and run by untrained young adults who had already been conditioned in the same environment. At Hillsong College what was called discipleship functioned as behavioural surveillance. Students were required to disclose personal details about relationships, finances, sexuality and mental health, often under the pressure of not being accepted into the college if they did not. Even staff were required to submit private communications when requested by senior leadership. Declining was not an option, because to say no to leadership would put a mark against your name.

Over time everyone learned to constantly self-monitor. This was justified as accountability, but it was really coercive control and a profound abuse of power. I also experienced what is known as moral injury, the deep internal conflict that comes from being pressured to do things that violated my own integrity. There were times that I carried out instructions from senior leaders that I knew were wrong: pressuring volunteers to overserve, protecting reputations instead of truth or silencing questions to maintain unity, all while believing this was the faithful thing to do. I still wrestle with the guilt of having once enforced the same system that deeply harmed me and others. That kind of psychological manipulation does not just wound your mind, it fractures your sense of morality, purpose and your trust in yourself.

I served 14-hour Sundays and multiple nights per week unpaid while juggling full-time work, study, health issues and parenting. Volunteering was sold as building God's house, but what it really built was a free workforce without boundaries or fair treatment. As long as new people were coming through the doors, those who had been burnt out or harmed were pushed out the back door and forgotten. We were told, 'This is family, and in a family everyone helps out.' This narrative was used to justify overwork and self-sacrifice, spiritually exploiting and masking coercive control under the language of home and family.

In 2018 Hillsong formally became its own denomination, breaking away from the Australian Christian Churches and beginning to credential its own pastors. This meant that Hillsong was no longer accountable to an external denominational body and began handling complaints entirely in-house. While they have since partnered with external safeguarding organisations, real accountability remains limited. The secrecy surrounding reports of harm and the internal culture of loyalty mean there is often insufficient evidence for external bodies to act, leaving survivors without protection or recourse. This shift gave Hillsong even greater autonomy and further concentrated power within a small circle of senior leaders and internally selected governance.

In 2019, while I was on staff, I was groomed and sexually assaulted by Viliamu Leuga, a senior male leader who had been assigned to provide my pastoral care. When I disclosed to Hillsong what had happened I was not met with authentic support; I was met with a PR plan masked as spiritual care. I was threatened behind closed doors, blamed for the abuse and silenced by NDAs and non-disparagement clauses in my staff contract. Leadership told me that reporting to police could cost me my job. They urged me to think about not bringing shame to God's church and the need to forgive my abuser. The grooming was reframed as an affair instead of what it was: adult clergy sexual abuse. I was put in further danger when leadership made my perpetrator aware

of my reports, and I needed to take out an IVO to protect myself and my family. I eventually decided to report the assault to police when it became very clear that Hillsong were going to put the church brand above my own safety or the protection of others. When my perpetrator was charged with sexual assault and eventually pled guilty in court, Hillsong never apologised, never acknowledged their failings and never took accountability for what occurred within their so-called healthy church. My perpetrator has since moved denominations and quickly became one of the leaders on the Victoria–Tasmania leadership team of Churches of Christ as their safe places and professional standards consultant.

The betrayal did not end with the assault at Hillsong; it continued in closed-door meetings, undocumented communication and retrospective bias records written to protect the institution, not me, the victim – and I know that I am not the only one. There are many others who have courageously spoken out about the abuse they experienced at Hillsong Church, and I have sat in many services and staff meetings where those victims were laughed at, minimised, called ‘bitter’ or ‘divisive’ and discredited. While not everyone within these environments experienced the same level of harm, large, high-control institutions like Hillsong rely on this spectrum of control. Thousands of people exist on the edges of the system, experiencing only mild or limited coercive tactics. These members often become the most vocal defenders of the institution, used to discredit victims and minimise allegations of abuse. Campaigns like ‘I Love My Hillsong Church’, where thousands of people are encouraged to publicly share positive experiences of the church, are examples of how mass messaging is used to drown out victim-survivor voices and preserve the brand’s reputation.

Leaving Hillsong was not just leaving a prior workplace, it was losing an entire community, a social network and an identity. People I had known for over a decade stopped replying to messages or told me that I was now evil and they could no longer associate with me. I was erased and treated as an outcast by the same people who once claimed to be my family. That kind of relational abandonment compounds the trauma. For many survivors, it is easier to stay in the system than to face that kind of loss. But those who do leave are left to rebuild their sense of self from the ground up. What happened to me is not unique. My experiences, along with my professional training, are what inform my work now. They mirror what I hear week after week from clients recovering from high-control religious groups and cults across Australia. The patterns are strikingly consistent: coercive recruitment disguised as care and community, obedience and fear disguised as faith, labour and financial exploitation disguised as service and sacrifice, and silence disguised as loyalty. These are not isolated behaviours, they are systemic tactics of group-based coercive control operating in plain sight within socially legitimised mainstream institutions.

Today I work with survivors of religious trauma, cults and coercive systems. They are teachers, nurses, parents, artists, pastors and young people – people who gave the best of themselves to the systems that used their goodness against them. And their stories echo mine: deep fear and shame, chronic guilt, loss of identity, low self-esteem and difficulty trusting their own thoughts and bodies. For many of us the impacts are long term and far reaching. We see persistent anxiety and hypervigilance; complex PTSD symptoms; loss of trust in authority, spirituality and even ourselves; isolation and relational breakdowns; developmental trauma for adults who grew up inside these systems; difficulty making decisions after years of being told what to think, believe and feel; shame around rest, pleasure and boundaries – the very things that make a healthy life possible – and for many a lifelong struggle to rebuild meaning, safety and belonging. These are not abstract or isolated effects, they are the lived realities of people still recovering from the psychological, physical and relational damage of high-control coercive groups. My role is to support survivors to reclaim their autonomy, learn critical thinking skills, rebuild self-trust and recover a sense of personal identity outside of the frameworks that once controlled them.

From both lived and professional experience I urge the committee to consider the following recommendations, and these recommendations align with those of the white paper submission *Beyond Belief*: funding of specialist trauma-informed, survivor-led services for people leaving coercive groups and for affected family members; trauma-informed, survivor-led professional development for practitioners and frontline workers to recognise and respond to group-based coercive control, especially in an Australian context; the establishment of a permanent independent commissioner for coercive group harm that can oversee and coordinate between these different services and agencies; and education and awareness at a community level in schools, universities, workplaces and community groups.

In closing, I never imagined that I would speak publicly about what happened to me inside Hillsong Church, but I am doing so because I know that I am not alone. There are thousands of survivors whose lives have been dismantled by group-based coercive control and systems that call themselves spiritual communities. This

inquiry is not just about fringe groups, it is about what happens when power goes unchecked and when institutions are protected instead of people. If we do not act, we will continue to sacrifice the safety and wellbeing of survivors while perpetrators are protected. Thank you for listening and for giving space to voices that have been silenced for far too long. I am happy to take any questions from the committee. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Elise. On behalf of the committee can I say thank you for your evidence, for your courage and your bravery in sharing your experiences. We are truly grateful, so thank you.

Elise, I would like to talk to you about the role that the Victorian government can play in better protecting Victorians who may be members of cults and high-control groups. From your perspective, what is the number one thing that the Victorian government can do to address this and support people in cults and high-control groups?

Elise HEERDE: I think the number one thing is we need more trained support people who can actually be there to catch people when they recognise that they are in a high-control group or a cult, and at the moment it is very limited for them to try and find professional support that understands their experience. There are financial constraints; a lot of people coming out of cults have given over a lot, if not all, of their finances to the group, so accessing that support is also an immediate issue. But being able to find where that support is, which is limited within Australia – so that training or the professional development for frontline services, for counsellors, for psychologists and for social workers to be able to not just identify what makes a high-control group or a cult, but to understand the impacts that that has had on the clients that they are seeing.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that. Do you see any gaps in the existing laws and legislative framework in Victoria or at the national level that could also address the impacts of coercion and control in group settings?

Elise HEERDE: There are a lot of gaps that are laid out quite well in the Beyond Belief submission. Law is not my area of expertise, so there is nothing in particular that I can point to except to point back to that submission where they have laid out where those gaps are and where that exists, because there is an overlap in the dynamics between intimate partner violence and coercive control within that kind of relationship, but there are also very much differences that exist within group-based coercive control, and so I think that is where those gaps are seen when it comes to the law, but there is nothing that I could particularly point to because that is not my area.

The CHAIR: Would you be able to elaborate on some of those differences between coercive control in a group setting versus coercive control in a family violence setting?

Elise HEERDE: Yes. So for me personally, when I started to recognise that there was something going on within this system that I was a part of, a high-control church system, I started to recognise that when I was actually joining the dots between the abuse that I experienced in that setting and what was going on in this group. So in a group setting, what you have is a whole lot of different dynamics going on where there might be behaviours that are acceptable or even kind of reinforced by the group, and if that does not feel okay for somebody, what we can see even through research is that good old peer pressure going, 'Well, everyone else thinks this is okay; everyone else thinks this is the right or the good thing to do so it must be, so I'm going to do it,' and that is where a lot of that moral injury comes in, once they have realised what has actually happened. And the different dynamics that exist in a group setting when you have that victim–perpetrator continuum, when people are expected to then kind of pass on that same pressure to the people around them or below them – there are complex layers that exist within a group, and just within having lots of different people involved, which is not necessarily seen when it is just in a relationship with one person.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will hand over to Christine.

Chris COUZENS: Thank you, Elise, and thank you so much for your contribution through your submission but also sharing your personal experience today. We really appreciate that, so thank you so much for coming in. I just have a question: you talked about the work that you have been doing; is that predominantly Hillsong survivors that are coming to you, or is it a diverse range of people?

Elise HEERDE: Yes, it is a very diverse range. It is definitely not just Hillsong people. This is the first time that I have publicly named Hillsong – unless they had been there and knew that I was a part of it. I see people

from, I would say, probably 10 different cults and high-control groups, and so people from the exact group that I was part of would maybe only make up 2 per cent of my current clients.

Chris COUZENS: Would they be in large numbers?

Elise HEERDE: The Hillsong clients that are coming from there?

Chris COUZENS: Well, generally – the cult survivors that are seeking your services and support.

Elise HEERDE: Yes. There are not enough trained professionals at the moment to be able to keep up with that demand. We can talk more about that in the hearing with the Religious Trauma Collective. Personally, in my practice there are a lot of people that are looking for support that understands their experience. There are also quite a lot of people that have looked for that in different places with practitioners who have not had an understanding or an awareness of group-based coercive control or cults, and they have been retraumatised in that process because there has just been a misunderstanding of what could trigger someone that is coming out of that environment. That may work really well for the rest of their clients that do not have that history. There are a lot of people that are looking for support, and there is a lack of informed practitioners.

Chris COUZENS: How do they find you? Is it online, word of mouth or all of the above?

Elise HEERDE: All of the above. It is generally through the Religious Trauma Collective and the work that we do there. Also it would be through my writing. I am very passionate about education in this space. It is generally kind of word of mouth, so if someone has shared an article that I have written and gone ‘Hey, this sounds like our experience,’ then they have been able to connect and go ‘I’ve never heard anyone explain it that way’ or ‘It sounds like you’re just telling my story’. It is mostly word of mouth, but then the rest will be through just googling things like ‘church trauma’ or ‘church hurt’ or different things that they have experienced. On the back end of the business, we are trying to figure out where these cult survivors are and what kinds of things they are really experiencing right now that they are going to be putting into Google. Most people that would come and see me are not coming to me saying, ‘I have religious trauma.’ They generally will not know that that is what they are coming for; they just know that there are other people they have tried to talk to about it and they have not been understood or they have not been heard.

Chris COUZENS: We have heard and read some submissions of people being completely destitute when they do leave a cult. They are shunned by their family and their friends. Do you think that that is an issue, in terms of the direction that this committee might take in terms of recommendations and how we might address that? I know it is quite difficult, but have you got any thoughts around that? I often wonder, ‘Well, if they’re destitute, they probably don’t even have a phone. How are they going to access services?’

Elise HEERDE: That is why we need the frontline support groups to be trained in awareness. That is why we need the independent commissioner to be pulling groups together, looking for housing and looking for finances and employment, if they are at a point where they can work. There are a lot of cult survivors that are never physically or mentally in a place where they can return to employment again. It is being able to look holistically at what a cult survivor is most likely going to need when they come out of that. Isolation is huge for every single person that I have ever worked with. It is that isolation from not just family or friends that they have been shunned from or are no longer able to connect with, but it is also then isolation from a world that they have never been allowed to engage with before. So they do not know where to start. We need to have a point where there is just one place that they could go to get the direction that they need, because they will come out not knowing what they need, and we need to have something there to catch them.

Chris COUZENS: Just leading on from that – and you have already addressed some of it – what are some of the common mental health challenges experienced by individuals who leave coercive groups, and how can clinicians better recognise and address trauma specific to these experiences?

Elise HEERDE: Yes. It is complex PTSD. There are a lot of physical, somatic issues that are going on, whether that is that inside that cult or high-control group, they did not have access to proper health care, so it is being able to also make sure that they have that access; chronic pain due to stress over a very long period of time or other coercive behaviours that are happening inside that group; anxiety; depression; or flashbacks, whether they are visual flashbacks or emotional flashbacks where their body is just remembering different things that happened. There is a really deep sense of distrust, not just in the world around them but also in

themselves, because they have never had the opportunity to learn how to trust themselves before. They have always been told what they need to do. That sense of just not knowing who they are is generally what we would see. Underlying that depression and anxiety is that sense of overwhelm in terms of, 'What do I do with my life now?'

Chris COUZENS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Chris. Annabelle.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Thank you, Elise. This is amazing, and you are so articulate and honest. I am going a little rogue from our questions – sorry Secretariat – but I am just kind of filling the gaps. Ella asked about laws and policy suggestions, and I am quite interested in your recommendation around defining criminalising psychological coercion and control. My question on that is how the reforms can be implemented without limiting freedom of religion or association. I know you said that you are not a lawyer, but your lived experience is really critical.

Elise HEERDE: Freedom of religion is vital. We need to make sure that that stays. Everyone has a right to believe what they want to believe. The issue is when there are behaviours that are causing harm to other people. I think being able to put a definition around that – in terms of the definition, I will probably take that on notice so that I can make sure that I get that right for you – it needs to be a definition that is taking into account what behaviours are causing harm and what patterns of behaviour we are seeing that are causing these different layers and levels of harm in survivors. I hope that kind of answers it.

Annabelle CLEELAND: It does. And then from that, in family violence we often see the victims become perpetrators, and you spoke about your own moral guilt, which is a really descriptive term. How do we grapple with that legislation around coercion when you are also potentially criminalising people like you?

Elise HEERDE: I think that is why there needs to be that awareness and education of the dynamics of group-based coercive control and the victim–perpetrator continuum to be able to make sure that whatever we are criminalising is getting to that top level of people that are at the top, that are not necessarily being controlled by anyone above them, but that is where the layers of control and manipulation are happening, going down through. If we are not understanding group-based coercive control and the victim–perpetrator continuum, then we will risk criminalising people that are actually under coercive control that have that moral injury – well-intentioned people who end up participating in systems that are causing harm. Again, we have to have that education and awareness around what is going on inside these groups and who is actually pulling the strings at the top.

Annabelle CLEELAND: That is the million-dollar question because it is so difficult to even follow the financial chain at the moment, let alone understand who it is and how they can be currently protected. 'Secrecy' is used a lot in this inquiry, and looking at laws that might be enabling or protecting that level of –

Elise HEERDE: Yes, and that level will usually rely on the people below them to take the fall.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Your recommendation around extending mandatory reporting laws to all religious organisations – understanding your personal experience and how that convicted perpetrator has gone on to be surrounded by other people as well, I think, not the disclosure, is quite heartbreaking, to be honest. How do you see that happening in practice, and who has access to the information? Where is that information held? Give me more about that.

Elise HEERDE: I will take that on notice. I will give you an answer now, but I will flesh that out a bit more for you on notice. This is looking at my experience with religious organisations that are actually registered as a religious organisation. So I just want to note there are a lot of cults and groups out there that will have zero records of existing, like the Two by Twos, and so it is not going to work for every cult and every high-control group. However, where we do have these more mainstream religious groups that are registered, at the moment there is zero place to communicate between different denominations of these churches, which is why my perpetrator has been able to just jump straight over to Churches of Christ and get a job two months after his good behaviour bond finished, working as their safe church officer with just ridiculous access to vulnerable people again – because there is no communication between a lot of these organisations. That is where I would like to take what you can do about that on notice to actually have a think about what is going to be practical to

do, because I understand that is a really big thing that I am suggesting that we do and it probably will not start with that one big thing. But I would like to have a think about the steps that could be taken, and I will send that to you.

Annabelle CLEELAND: I have another question, but I will share with my colleagues, and maybe if we have got time at the end.

The CHAIR: Thanks. John.

John LISTER: Thank you. Thank you, Elise, for coming in and sharing your own story. I am particularly interested in the education side of what you have experienced, particularly with your work at Hillsong College, which I understand is offering VET courses and some links to university courses as well in Australia. I am particularly interested in the engagement between these organisations and young people through different education settings. With Hillsong College at the time when you were working there, how was the enrolment managed? Was it through people who came to Hillsong Church or was it open to the public as well?

Elise HEERDE: It was both. It was open to the public; however, if someone wanted to attend Hillsong College – the VET course that was happening on campus in Melbourne – they had to commit to coming to Hillsong, because a big part of their course was to volunteer at Hillsong. Hillsong as a whole was then a huge part of their volunteer workforce. They were relying on students that had to do that to be able to pass their course. I am aware that in the last five years or so they have reduced the amount of hours that students need to volunteer. What that has been reduced to I am not too sure, but there is still that expectation that they will be a part of Hillsong Church for the time that they are at the college. The majority of the recruitment in Melbourne was of young people, especially youth that were just finishing up high school. Generally the conversation would be, ‘Why don’t you take a year off after high school and come and do Hillsong College?’ That was the top-tier pathway to leadership in Hillsong or to be on staff. Most people knew very well that if you wanted to be on staff you had to go through Hillsong College.

John LISTER: So when they were in the college, who had contact with the students? Was it people who were registered trainers? Were they training and assessing qualified, or was there a range of people?

Elise HEERDE: There was a range of people in the classroom. They were pastors who had gone through their –

John LISTER: T and A?

Elise HEERDE: T and A, yes. I actually went and did my diploma in training and assessing, because we only had one other person in the college who could train other trainers. I put myself through that course. I paid for that myself, because once I was in the leadership role in Melbourne, I was the only staff member running the college. I was responsible for the students and also for training the other pastors who were doing that on top of their full-time roles. So the people in the classroom training them were trained. However, they also had mentors, who were generally other pastors or leaders within the church that were connected to their practicum. They were connected to their volunteer work, and they were not necessarily TAE trained.

John LISTER: Yes. Just on that, you have already kind of answered one thing, which was that I wanted to talk about the expectations to engage with the church as opposed to just being enrolled at the college. But just going into that a little bit further, were there any consequences for people who did not engage with the church at the college?

Elise HEERDE: Generally, if they chose not to engage with the church and they were up-front about that when they were going through the enrolment process and were saying, ‘Look, I can’t engage and do my practicum through the church,’ in my experience, only one student in Melbourne was actually accepted into the college on those grounds. That was because there was a connection with the church that they were a part of, so they were going to do that through their church. But that is an exception, not general practice.

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

The CHAIR: Thanks. Cindy.

Cindy McLEISH: Thank you. Thank you, Elise, for coming in and talking to us. I just want to touch on what John was saying. What does volunteering for the church look like?

Elise HEERDE: It can look like anything. It can look like cleaning the floors during the middle of the week and going in and cleaning the bathrooms. It can look like standing on the door on a Sunday and welcoming people in. I think I volunteered on every single team that Hillsong had, except for creative, because I do not sing or play an instrument. I did children's ministry – I worked in their children's Sunday program. I was a youth leader at the church that I was part of before Hillsong. I had done hosting, which is where you welcome people in and you help them find a seat. You are generally the person that is expected to make sure you get their details before they leave. I was then part of the volunteer team that would be calling them, which was very structured. We had to call them on week 1, week 2, week 6 and week 12, with the goal that by week 12 they were committed to being a congregant of Hillsong Church. Yes, I think I have volunteered in their women's ministry, which was then on Thursday mornings, and then I was volunteering as a trainer at the college for the first 12 months. I was a volunteer until I joined staff as the college administrator. I was paid two days a week and I was volunteering the other three days.

Cindy McLEISH: You mentioned just then the children's Sunday program. Did everyone have working with children checks?

Elise HEERDE: Yes.

Cindy McLEISH: Fabulous. Earlier you mentioned love bombing and that really warm and friendly – probably a bit of an overload. Did congregation members realise they were love bombing?

Elise HEERDE: No. No, I did not even realise that that is what we were doing – that that was what I was doing. It is that difference between just being welcoming and warm and then giving people their personal space, which I would say is caring and nice. Like when I came in here to the committee, you all came over and shook my hand and said hello – that is not love bombing. Love bombing is when you are purposefully looking – so we would be trained to be watching that door for people we had not seen before, for people who are coming into the building for the very first time, and we were to make sure that we connected with them personally.

When the privacy laws changed and we were not able to take people's numbers and details on a card, which we used to be able to do, we were encouraged by leadership to take their number and put it in our personal phone as a friend so that we could still follow up in the same way and get them connected. It was very much, 'As soon as you can, show them all the love.' They would be getting the coffee with the pastor; they would be connected with all of the different leaders in that campus, with the intent of, 'They're going to stay here because we've shown them so much love.' But really, the first point of call was to get them into a volunteer team and get them working. What we were told is, 'That's just going to help them feel like they've found a place where they can belong,' when in reality it meant, 'We're really short on volunteers' – two sides of the same coin.

Cindy McLEISH: Did you employ cleaners?

Elise HEERDE: At the campus I was attending, there was a cleaner that would come once a week. Generally there were there were things happening during the week at the campus, different programs running, so by the time you would normally get to a Sunday morning it would need to be cleaned again, so there would usually be someone that would go and open up the building, make sure everything was clean, mop all the floors again. There was a team called the refresh team, which would then be required to, in between our services – because we had multiple services on a Sunday – go clean the toilets, check everything is clean, go into the auditorium and make sure that is all clean. Their motto was 'a culture of excellence'.

Cindy McLEISH: Just finally to touch base, you talked about assaults and being abused. How many others were abused and did somebody ever take the fall, or was it always back on the victims?

Elise HEERDE: I have never seen Hillsong take real accountability. I have seen them make apologies that still blame the victim. I have seen them change some policies and some wording that I know they are still not following through on. It is all good to change your language and to change policies, but if you are not actually following the policies, then what is the point? And there are definitely other victims. There are other victims that are public about being victims. There are other victims that I am aware of that are confidential.

Cindy McLEISH: Under-age victims?

Elise HEERDE: I am not aware of any under-age victims, no. The victims that I am aware of are adult clergy sexual abuse.

Cindy McLEISH: Okay. Thanks, Ella.

The CHAIR: Jackson.

Jackson TAYLOR: Thank you, Chair; and thank you very much, Elise, for coming along today and for your honesty. My question is: in what ways can ideas like faithfulness or belonging be tied to financial contributions in coercive groups, and what kinds of psychological pressure might this create for members?

Elise HEERDE: Yes, a big one – and again, I will speak to my experience at Hillsong, which I have also seen in other churches, especially evangelical churches and Pentecostal churches – is the finances will generally fall back on being coerced into tithing, which is to give 10 per cent of whatever you earn. Generally what we are told in a Pentecostal setting is what is known as the prosperity gospel, where if you give to God, he will give back more, so people who are even really struggling financially will be encouraged to continue giving to the church, under the pressure of, ‘If you don’t, you’re stealing from God,’ and who would want to steal from God?

There is also a lot of pressure to be generous, and that idea or that narrative of generosity, which can be a beautiful thing when it is done well and measured, is taken to the extremes, where people are told that to be godly is to die to yourself, to not need anything for yourself, to give everything to God – which is to the church – and that once you have given those funds, you do not get to decide what happens to that, because that now belongs to God. So if you ask any questions, you are then questioning God. And that is where it really brings in that kind of psychological conditioning that is different from other types of coercion because it has that divine eternal element to it, where you already have this internalised behaviour of needing to be obedient. So you do what you are told to do because you are also told to trust the leadership, who are telling you, ‘What you need to do with your money is to give it to us.’

Jackson TAYLOR: Thanks. Just another quick question: in your work and experience, are there significant numbers of people at any one given time in these types of groups that want to get out but cannot? And what is often the biggest hindrance and decision-maker for people to not leave?

Elise HEERDE: Yes, there are. I believe there are lots of people that are really wrestling with lots of deep questions and a sense that something is wrong, whether they can put their finger on it or not, and the majority of the time what I see as the biggest thing that keeps them there is the sense of community – knowing how much they are going to lose if they leave but also just that sense of ‘This is all I have known. This is my whole world. This is familiar.’ And for our nervous system, familiar equals safety, even if we are not physically or psychologically safe, so for them to walk away feels extremely dangerous. And in some of these cults, it is physically dangerous to walk away and to leave. But there is always that element of ‘I know what I’m going to lose. I don’t know what’s on the other side. I don’t know if I’m going to survive outside of this group.’ And so that is the biggest block for people – it is going ‘Am I going to be okay on the other side? What am I going to lose? And am I prepared to lose that?’ – because that is a real loss. A lot of the work that I do is grief work with clients – grieving all the different layers of loss but also what they did not get inside those groups that they should have got.

Jackson TAYLOR: Okay. Thanks, Elise. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Christine, you had another question.

Chris COUZENS: Yes, just a quick one. Just going back to the questions that John had raised about Hillsong College. How is that funded to operate? And is there government funding attached to that?

Elise HEERDE: I am not sure if there is government funding. I do know it is generally that the students pay. And they pay a lot to serve the church a lot. So from my recollection for the diploma course, which is 12 months, I think it was about \$6000, and that would be required to be paid up-front. And there was a huge

reliance on international students, which is why the college downsized during COVID. And that is when the Melbourne campus was shut down. The Melbourne and Brisbane campuses were shut down in 2021.

Chris COUZENS: And they are back open?

Elise HEERDE: Actually, I think I heard that there is some kind of college happening in Melbourne at the moment, but I do not know the details. I try not to follow Hillsong too closely; it is a little bit triggering.

Chris COUZENS: And do you know how they are regulated?

Elise HEERDE: They are regulated through ASQA. I could be wrong on this, but when I was there the degree courses were regulated through Alphacrucis College. So there was a partnership there for the higher education. That may have shifted now; I am not sure.

Chris COUZENS: And that college – who are they?

Elise HEERDE: Alphacrucis is another Christian college. They do have secular courses as well, but they are predominantly a Christian college.

Chris COUZENS: Okay. So they would get government funding of some description?

Elise HEERDE: I would think so.

Chris COUZENS: Most of them do. Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Did you have another question, Annabelle?

Annabelle CLEELAND: No, I think you answered it. Do you?

Cindy McLEISH: Just a quick one around numbers: you mentioned that there have been thousands of survivors. How many people do you know that have left for similar reasons to you?

Elise HEERDE: That have left Hillsong specifically, or just groups in general?

Cindy McLEISH: Both.

Elise HEERDE: Hillsong specifically – with the different survivor groups that I am part of, which I will not name for confidentiality reasons, there are probably about 600. If we look at survivors across evangelical, Pentecostal, high-control churches in Victoria and Australia, that is where there would easily be thousands.

Cindy McLEISH: Thank you.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Can I ask – I changed my mind – when you were able to leave, what captured or helped you? Was it a phone line that you called, or a person? What was the safety net for you at the time?

Elise HEERDE: Yes, the safety net for me was that I had already started doing a lot of work with a counsellor that I had found who understood religious trauma. I was doing a lot of personal work while I was still turning up to church every week and trying my best to be involved, because I was also counting the cost of what it was going to be like to leave. I was there for probably a good two years while I was still figuring out how I could get out safely, and by safely I do not mean physically safely but safely for my mental health. Also there were different family dynamics with family members still choosing to be there after I left. That was probably one of my biggest supports when I finally was able to walk away, that my immediate family were extremely supportive, and so I was very lucky. There are a lot of cult survivors that leave and do not have their family. So that was a safety net that I had that a lot of people do not have.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Okay. Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: All right, Elise, I just have a few more to wrap up today's session. These will feel like they are coming from different areas.

It sounds like you are supporting a lot of people who have come out of cults and high-control groups that have a religious affiliation. Are you supporting people from groups without any clear religious affiliation? If so, could you expand on that a bit?

Elise HEERDE: Yes, I do, and there are still very common factors that exist when I am working with cult survivors who are not part of a religious cult. Those same factors exist without the existential part which we find in religious trauma. It will be the same kind of identifying factors – authoritarian leadership, control over information. There is generally still a form of indoctrination, whether that is indoctrination into a business model or a thought philosophy, so they are still working through with clients how they can connect to their own thoughts, how they can connect safely to their own body. There is generally still an ‘us versus them’ mentality. When we look at a religious group, it is generally us and God against everyone else. For them it is just them plus their group against everyone else, and the isolation and surveillance and not allowing them critical thinking. So the way in which I work with survivors of cults that are not religious is very similar to the way that I work with religious cults.

The CHAIR: You were speaking earlier about the Religious Trauma Collective, and I was wondering if they make referrals to practitioners and other support services when people go to them asking for help.

Elise HEERDE: Yes. We have a public registry of other practitioners who are trauma trained, who are trained in religious trauma. We have a registry of psychologists, counsellors, social workers and coaches on our website. We have got one page that has Australian practitioners and another that has New Zealand practitioners. This is only our second year, so we are still trying to grow that, and this is where we are really seeing that gap in practitioners in this space.

The CHAIR: It sounds like it is a really comprehensive list of practitioners that you have.

Elise HEERDE: We are hoping so, yes, because we need a safe place for people to land and where they can find what they need.

The CHAIR: Two more questions from me – in your experience, could you outline how gender roles and expectations are typically structured in coercive groups, and what impacts does this have on the environments, for example, the power imbalances that you might see?

Elise HEERDE: Yes. Through my experience, particularly at Hillsong, from the outside it looks like they promote gender equality, and you can see a lot of females on the platform. What you generally will not know is that most of those female pastors or leaders that are on the platform are married to a male pastor, especially if it is someone that is leading a congregation or a campus. Generally if there is a female doing that, they will be married, and there will be an expectation that both people in that couple will be doing that. I had a firsthand experience where I put my hand up to be a service pastor, which was just to look after one of our services from our campus. My husband was not really interested in that kind of role, and I was told unless I could get him on board, I could not do it, because it was a job for two people. Yet I knew that there were many single males doing exactly the same role in other campuses. So they look the part, but it is not necessarily what is going on.

In Melbourne, in particular, the staff was very much a boys club. I was on the executive team for a while and had very little input into what was actually going to happen. I understood very well that I was to just do what I was told to do with the college, even though I was running the Melbourne campus, and that was by the two male leaders. The impact that has is that that is not just seen in leadership – that is then the expectation that the man is the head of the household. He is the one that leads. Women can lead alongside, which is different from other cults that would just say women cannot speak and cannot lead. They can lead alongside, but there is still a sense, as a female, that you are not enough on your own and that whatever decision your husband makes is the one you just need to submit to – so a lot around the practice of submission is really impacting. In terms of gender roles with the LGBTQIA+ community, that was seen as – you know, they were welcome to be there, but you would never see anyone from that community in a leadership role, especially within the college. It was very much seen as a sin and a problem to be fixed, rather than an identity to be embraced.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thanks. A last question from me: we have heard other stakeholders suggest that dedicated research into coercive groups and their associated harms would be a valuable and important next step. Do you agree with this, and if so, which organisations or institutions do you think are best placed to carry out this research?

Elise HEERDE: To do research into the practices that are happening? Is that the question? Sorry.

The CHAIR: Yes, so do you think some dedicated research into the impacts of cults and high-control groups would be valuable, and who should carry out that research?

Elise HEERDE: Yes, that would definitely be valuable. We need more research in this space. I am starting to look into some of the research that is out there, as I am heading into a masters and looking at doing my thesis on this topic. While the research has grown in the last five to 10 years, there is still not enough within the Australian context. There is more research in the US, but it also presents very differently over there. A whole part of why we started the Religious Trauma Collective Australia and New Zealand is we have a very different context here, and so we need that research to reflect the context that we are seeing here in the cults and high-control groups that exist in Victoria and in Australia.

The CHAIR: On the topic of research, are there areas that you would recommend to prioritise – for example, research into experiences while someone is within that cult and high-control group organisational setting or research into experiences after leaving, or are there other areas to prioritise?

Elise HEERDE: Yes. I think to prioritise the awareness of what is going on inside those groups and how we identify that is really important, because if we cannot identify the groups that is happening in, then we can have all the research that we want on how to support survivors, but if we are not seeing where they are and also researching ways to support, I guess, the workers that are kind of surrounding or the family members that are watching their loved ones in these cults and high-control groups –

So the awareness first – we need the research on how we identify this, what we are looking for, what are the nuances that exist within these groups and also what are the common threads that we can see. And then we need research into what is happening with these people when they get out – what are the biggest hurdles that they are facing and how can we address them?

The CHAIR: Thank you. Christine just has one more question.

Chris COUZENS: Yes, one last question: when you spoke earlier from Ella's question about gender equality and stuff, you talked about the gay community being, you know, in there, but to be fixed. So conversion therapy, was that part of that?

Elise HEERDE: I have seen that happening in practice in one-on-one conversations with students that have come forward. The language they would put around it, because of the type of conditioning, is they will come forward and say, 'I'm struggling with same-sex attraction' and they come forward going, 'I'm going to be in trouble for this'. And what they are met with is a reinforcement of, 'Yes, this is wrong and there's something broken in you or you've sinned or you've done something bad, so I'm going to help you to try and fix that'. So while there is not an official conversion therapy happening, it is happening in one-on-one conversations all the time.

Chris COUZENS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Elise, 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 acknowledge the significance of your testimony. 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. So once again, thank you for appearing before us. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witness withdrew.