

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 – Tuesday 21 October 2025

MEMBERS

Ella George – Chair

Cindy McLeish

Annabelle Cleeland – Deputy Chair

Jackson Taylor

Chris Couzens

Rachel Westaway

John Lister

WITNESS *(via videoconference)*

Tore Klevjer, President, Cult Information and Family Support

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. My name is Ella George, and I am the Chair of the Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee. I declare open this public hearing of the Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee 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 would also like to acknowledge my colleagues participating today: Rachel Westaway, the Member for Prahran; Christine Couzens, the Member for Geelong; John Lister, the Member for Werribee; Jackson Taylor, the Member for Bayswater; and Annabelle Cleeland, the Member for Euroa and Deputy Chair, who is joining us online.

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 to report back no later than 30 September 2026.

I ask that witnesses keep the terms of reference in mind when providing their evidence. This inquiry is not about judging or questioning anyone's beliefs. The committee remains focused on how Victoria can better protect and support people from coercive groups, while also respecting and safeguarding the right to religious freedom and belief. 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. The evidence we are hearing will continue to help the committee shape practical and balanced recommendations, protecting individuals and upholding protected rights.

On behalf of the committee I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have engaged in the inquiry thus far, particularly the individuals and families who have bravely shared their personal experience with cults and organised fringe groups.

Today the committee will hear from Tore Klevjer, from Cult Information and Family Support, and I thank Tore for his interest and time 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 Tore. I invite you to make a brief opening statement, and this will be followed by questions from members. Thank you.

Tore KLEVJER: Very good. Thank you for having me. It is quite a privilege to be here, and it is great to see this all coming together and being formally recognised. A little bit about me and Cult Information and Family Support: I have been involved with CIFS since its inception in 1996. My involvement played a significant role in my own recovery, after an 11-year involvement with the Children of God, which I left in 1986.

Cult Information and Family Support, CIFS, is a not-for-profit, volunteer-run organisation established in 1996. We provide support, education and advocacy for individuals and families affected by high-control or cultic groups. Our activities include counselling and referral; support groups, including a monthly online meeting for ex-members and affected families; education and consultancy; and annual weekend recovery workshops, one of which I have just returned from this last weekend, conducted in Melbourne, which was accepted with a lot of enthusiasm.

In the last financial year CIFS responded to approximately 600 emails, 110 phone calls, often lasting an hour at a time, and 41 hours of individual, face-to-face Zoom sessions. We operate entirely on donations and a shoestring budget. Funding for groups such as ours would be a huge help. As president and a practising counsellor I have personally witnessed the devastating psychological and relational consequences of cult involvement, including complex PTSD, anxiety, loss of trust and disrupted education and finances. Re-entry

into society often mirrors post-institutional experiences, such as prison. The ripple effect of cult harm is also worthy of a mention, since when a family member is recruited into a group such as this, they are often separated from family and loved ones in order to fully devote themselves to this new cause. If they are not physically separated, they are emotionally separated, and the cult recruit becomes unrecognisable to their family. The increasing number of second-generation cult members is also of great concern, and these are people who have grown up in cults and do not have any real idea of society outside.

I want to start by saying that this is a very complex and nuanced issue; this is not black and white. When we have great freedom-of-religion laws we also have this freedom exploited in harmful ways, making combating this difficult. In some ways this is a societal issue. Psychologists tell us that we are in a loneliness epidemic, with mental health issues on the rise and the breakdown of the family unit due to globalisation and other factors. This fosters in us a need for belonging and community. Coupled with this, we are witnessing a bombardment of information and misinformation that can lead people to crave some simple answers. Cults provide simple answers to complex problems.

A legal approach to addressing this issue is often interpreted by cults as persecution, because they are doing the right thing, and it further strengthens the resolve to stay in the cult and go underground. It can also separate people by creating an us-and-them dynamic that is the same as that which we accuse cults of. I think the answer lies in part in fostering a greater accountability for illegal practices, rather than a cult label, and also human rights issues to be addressed. The legal avenue has been pursued in France and to some extent in Norway. In France they set up a cult watchdog called the Interministerial Mission of Vigilance and Combat against Cultic Deviances. As far as I can see from my own limited research, this has been met with significant debate and has been anything but straightforward. However, this is a model that can be used as a reference point for the committee. France does continue to modify its laws, and we may see some progress in the future.

A particularly concerning issue is coercive recruitment, where individuals are drawn into religious organisations without full, truthful or transparent disclosure of the group's beliefs and expectations, and we see this very strongly with the Korean group Shincheonji, who when recruiting people in universities will actually tell them, 'We are not Shincheonji; they are a cult. Come with us; we're a Bible study.' Groups often conceal their doctrines until recruits are fully immersed and psychologically dependent. This conversion by concealment represents manipulative grooming tactics found in abusive relationships. Such practices inhibit informed consent and entrap individuals, who later suffer psychological, emotional, financial and social harm when trying to leave.

Evangelism, or sharing one's faith, is the central tenet of many faith traditions, including Christianity, and I am concerned that legislation must not infringe upon legitimate, open and respectful religious expression and dialogue. To balance protection and freedom I propose a consumer law model where religious or ideological organisations must publish a statement of faith or belief practices clearly outlining their doctrines and membership expectations. If an organisation withholds or misrepresents its beliefs and this leads to harm, individuals could have a legal recourse, similar to protections against deceptive conduct in consumer law.

Financial transparency and tax-free status – religious and charitable organisations benefiting from tax exemptions must be held to greater accountability. I recommend mandatory public financial reporting, demonstrated use of funds for genuinely charitable purposes and oversight to ensure groups do not promote harm, exclusion and manipulation. Such measures would protect public trust and discourage misuse of charitable status. I also propose that there be more support for survivors and people who come out of cults, including second-generation people. They need financial assistance. They need support to reintegrate, and many cannot afford the cost of trauma recovery without targeted funding.

Protection through education is essential. We need to introduce awareness programs in high schools and universities and treat cult recruitment awareness as a health and safety issue, especially in universities and organisations. Particularly in tertiary settings, failure to inform students about coercive recruitment techniques should be regarded as institutional neglect, in my opinion.

There are many parallels between cultic abuse and domestic violence, and I think they are well documented. My reluctance to go down a legal avenue is that having come out of the Children of God and seeing the raids that happened, taking children away from parents, in 1992 I think it was, had no result. Modern slavery – the Twelve Tribes group is another overt cult that has been investigated with no ongoing consequences. And

wrapping up, Shincheonji is actively recruiting in Australian universities using deceptive and coercive methods. Victims lose education, family relationships and autonomy. Parents describe this as the living dead; the loved one becomes unapproachable due to the us-versus-them dynamic cultivated by cult systems. That is the end of my statement.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you very much, Tore, for that. Can I also introduce you to Cindy McLeish, the Member for Eildon, who has just joined us online as well.

Tore KLEVJER: Hi, Cindy.

The CHAIR: We will start off with some questions. So the first question from me: I would like to ask you about what some of the most pressing service gaps are for survivors and families who are seeking help, either after leaving a coercive group or if they have children in a coercive group.

Tore KLEVJER: There are no simple questions or answers here, are there?

The CHAIR: No, there are not.

Tore KLEVJER: It varies hugely, which makes it difficult to explain. It depends on the group they have come out of, but generally speaking people have huge gaps in their education. They have difficulty applying for jobs because they cannot account for the lost years that they have spent in a cult. Many times they do not know how to function in society. They do not know how to apply for Centrelink; they do not know how to apply for the funding and things that are out there for people. So there is this huge gap with just integrating into society, and some explain it as being like an invisible immigrant, because you do not look like an immigrant but you have stepped out of a completely different cultural setting where your bills were paid for you, where your rent was paid, where you did not control any finances, you may not have owned a phone and you have been cut off from popular media. So even conversing with people in broader society becomes difficult, because our frames of reference are largely from popular media, movies et cetera. The problem is super huge with second-generation members who have grown up in a cult, because they have never known anything else, and for them to be able to access some kind of funding to resume studies or begin studies would be a huge help. There are real issues with counselling and psychological services available for ex-cult members as well, and they quite often need a lot of support by peers who have been there and who really understand the nuances and the issues that they are facing. So that is just some; I am sure I have missed many more.

The CHAIR: We have certainly heard a lot about the challenges associated with exiting a cult and a high-control group. From your perspective, what would an ideal pathway of exiting look like in terms of the different supports that people need?

Tore KLEVJER: The first thing is awareness, so that people coming out of a cult know that there is support available. So community groups et cetera would need to have flyers and awareness and awareness campaigns so that they know that help is available. I think ideally having someone who is specialised in various community groups who can advise in this area would be very helpful. I think in the US someone had published a book with strategies for cult-leavers to access community organisations and community help, and they have put that out there. I think something like that would be very helpful as well, just a breakdown of how to access help. Then from there we need to develop the relevant help for them, which would be financial assistance for study, financial assistance for counselling – am I answering the question?

The CHAIR: Yes, you absolutely are. You mentioned that, I think it was in the US, there was a book that outlined some experiences. In terms of something similar in Victoria, I have got two questions here. Firstly, what do you think is the best format for that? For example, should it be a website or a digital resource? And secondly, what kind of content do you think should be included in terms of awareness about cults?

Tore KLEVJER: I think digital is the way to go these days, especially as younger people coming out of cults access all the information digitally. So having search engines that will readily come up with the issues would be good. Different unis in Victoria have started publicity and they are actively putting this up on their student websites, on the student forums and the like. What was the second part of the question? Sorry.

The CHAIR: That is okay. What kind of content should be included in raising awareness about cults?

Tore KLEVJER: Yes. As with any scam in society, we need to raise awareness that scams exist, that not every group is benign and that these groups will lie to your face and misrepresent themselves, pretending to be your friend until you are far enough in for them to tell you who they really are. So it is critical thinking skills, it is awareness of all the scams and pitfalls out there, and if something seems too good to be true, it probably is too good to be true. Another whole aspect is to recognise your personal, human vulnerabilities and our need for social acceptance and our need for groups. We are herd animals and we have a very strong need to belong. When we are isolated or cut off, it puts us in a much more vulnerable position.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. I will hand over to Rachel. Thanks, Rachel.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you. Thank you, Tore. I would be very interested to know, in your wealth of experience over many decades, whether the characteristics of cults or high-control groups have changed over the years, and in particular whether the recruitment methods have changed, for example, online recruitment.

Tore KLEVJER: Yes, they have definitely changed over the years. I do not keep statistics on this and I do not know to what extent that would be, but I know that online recruiting is a thing, and many cults just operate solely online with their members. It has changed over the years from the Jonestown days and the big megacults. In some ways, cultic groups walk through society and eventually become acceptable to the point where we think they are just an organised religion as well, which is a danger. But cults tend to have gotten a lot smaller, and more insidious in a sense. We can see just one-on-one meditation cults where the guru just has one client at a time that they manipulate and use. There is a lot more of that kind of thing now: meditation, self-help; it seems like the narcissistic element in society tends to see where society is going and what the need is, and then capitalise on that. It is probably moving a little bit more away from the Christian cult tradition into more of the meditation style of things – which is all a very good thing that is recommended by society; meditation is seen as a way to overcome anxiety – self-development courses, that sort of thing. There has been definitely a shift.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Are you seeing anything through universities or any specific type of targeting of younger people?

Tore KLEVJER: With some cults, with Shincheonji for sure. They are one of the few cults now that are really actively recruiting through deception in every Australian university at the moment in every major city. They are a little bit of an exception in the way that they are really overtly recruiting and targeting vulnerable young people, specifically people from non-Australian backgrounds who come here to study, and particularly kids from Christian homes, inviting them to Bible studies and that sort of thing. Most other cults are a little more subtle in their recruiting techniques.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Christine.

Chris COUZENS: Thank you, Tore, for your contribution through your submission and also for being here today and sharing your lived experience, which is really valuable for the committee. What role could the Victorian government play in funding or coordinating trauma-informed support services for those affected?

Tore KLEVJER: What role can they play? A recognition of the issues would be a huge help, and some funding assistance for people who come out of cults would be a huge help in all the areas that I mentioned, with ongoing education in reintegrating people into society. Also legal support is a huge one. It is very difficult for people coming out of cults to have any kind of legal support for abuses they suffered in the group, because these groups have deep pockets and they can just play the game until a person goes broke and gives up. They would be a few things I would suggest.

Chris COUZENS: Which of your recommendations do you believe would have the greatest immediate impact for survivors?

Tore KLEVJER: The thing that really helps survivors is education and psychoeducation. Because until a person realises what the cult dynamic is and how they got recruited, their self-esteem remains undermined, and they think they joined just because they were stupid. When they realise that there is a whole coercive process targeting individuals and manipulating them into joining a group, it is a huge relief because then they can identify other groups, so it creates safety. That is a huge step forward. So, providing psychoeducation for these

people. Getting them there is another issue, because in many cults they are taught to mistrust psychologists or counsellors or anyone in the outside world, so that is a separate issue.

Chris COUZENS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will hand over to Annabelle, who is joining us online now. Annabelle.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Hey, Tore. Amazing contribution. I liked your quote that this is anything but straightforward, because that is how we feel, actually. Your comments around the mandatory reporting of finance were a bit of a mic drop moment, because we have found it quite difficult to understand the wealth of cults, considering the huge volume of money that is transacted. Are you suggesting that because you have seen it work somewhere, or seen evidence that this is a recommendation that will be effective because it has worked somewhere else in the world?

Tore KLEVJER: No. It is purely an idea, a thought bubble. How that becomes enforced is someone else's expertise and not mine. But I think that there needs to be greater transparency with charitable organisations. Many cults have cover organisations which function as a charity or a business – so greater scrutiny around some of that. If a group is reported – and that is another thing, we do not have a reporting avenue really for cults as yet. People will call me up and just say, 'This group down the street is a cult. I can see what they are doing. I have been to their meetings. How can I report them? How can I put them on some kind of a list?' And as far as I know, there is not really any kind of a list, and if there is, it is very benign. It is like, what do you do with that? But I think there should be some kind of accountability and scrutiny, especially on groups that are reported as dubious. But we have the consumer watchdog, and we should be looking into charitable organisations and how they spend their money. And as I understand it, the law is quite different when it comes to religion. The normal charity is under more scrutiny than a religious organisation is.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Yes. So that might bring me to my next question. How do you think we navigate that line of protecting individual rights of freedom of expression, religious freedoms and freedoms of belief but also legislating around those harmful high-control groups? Do you think it is possible to legislate coercive control without impacting people's freedoms?

Tore KLEVJER: I think that will be difficult, because society is full of advertising and false information and control, so at what point does that become dangerous? I am not a legal person, but I think that our legal system will find great difficulty in proving coercive control. I cannot see how it would not impact religious organisations. It would be very difficult. So my answer to that is I think the easier and safer path, without getting tied up in all kinds of legal red tape and court cases ongoing and trying to prove this and that – he with the best argument wins – would be to purely focus on illegal activity. And we have laws in place for that; we just have a real problem enforcing them. Even when we see an overt cult operating in society and we know that they are – groups such as the Twelve Tribes. All their members are basically slaves. No-one gets paid. They work 14-hour days. They have been accused of crimes. They have been investigated, and nothing has happened. The Children of God investigations back in the 90s, it was all just tied up in legal red tape and nothing was heard. There was a string of witnesses from the cult who were prepared to testify, and it got thrown out on a technicality. So these things that have happened do not really inspire confidence in me that a legal approach is going to help this.

Annabelle CLEELAND: We heard yesterday from the main investigator of the Family that after four years of investigating them, all they could really go for was perjury.

Tore KLEVJER: It is tricky.

Annabelle CLEELAND: I guess that was quite a while ago, though. All right. My other question, I guess, is about low-hanging fruit. Is there anything we should be tackling quickly and immediately for the best impact on protecting people from entering cults or supporting them leaving?

Tore KLEVJER: Universities and secondary school education, absolutely. My idea for that would be to recruit some cult leavers and develop an education package that they can be paid to go and present, along with their own story, to years 5 and 6 in secondary schools and universities, especially when people enter university, on opening day. Also, some accountability around universities not to just welcome these people in. There is still a lot of ignorance around this. I was contacted by a girl from a university in Brisbane who was doing an

assignment on cults, and she had gone to the university's chaplains and said, 'What can you tell me about cults?' And they simply said, 'It's just a freedom of religion issue. They're just another religion.' So even the chaplains in the universities have no idea that these cultic groups are cults because of coercion and misrepresentation and lying and manipulation. They think it is purely a doctrinal issue, as do many of the churches. They think that people are getting recruited because they have bad theological beliefs. As a result of that, many churches think that in order to help people out of cults, all they have to do is correct their theology. But it is much greater than that. It is a good starting point.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Thank you. That is a good starting point. Thank you for all your work in this space and for helping others, and also your contribution was excellent.

Tore KLEVJER: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Annabelle. John.

John LISTER: Thank you. Chair. One of the suggestions that you have got in your submission, and you mentioned this in your opening remarks, was this idea of a statement of faith or belief practices. Can you elaborate a little bit more on what that means?

Tore KLEVJER: It ties in with the lying and coercion that happens when people join the group. So once again, I am not a legal mind and I do not know how this plays out in reality, but cults have an inside and an outside belief system. They have a belief system that is available for society, that says what they do, which is mostly a lie. With the Children of God, we presented ourselves as a youth work organisation that was getting kids off drugs. So an accurate statement of faith that would outline beliefs and practices would give a person who leaves and who has been harmed some recourse to be able to come back – just like consumer law – and say, 'Well, it wasn't as advertised. I didn't know what I was joining. And what you told me was quite different to what I experienced. You didn't tell me that I would be required to work 14 hours a day as well as weekends, not have any free time and be eventually cut off from my family and friends for my own spiritual progress.' So I suppose that is the idea, that if they had to document beliefs and practices, expectations, and if they deviate from that to the point where it actually harms an individual psychologically, they would have recourse to come back, in black and white, and just say, 'You didn't fulfil your obligation. You lied to me.'

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

The CHAIR: Great. Tore, there is just one more area that I would like to explore with you today, which is around the support that you are offering parents and families. From your evidence I understand you do have a lot of parents and families contacting you, is that correct?

Tore KLEVJER: That is correct, yes.

The CHAIR: Do you get a sense of how many or what proportion of, say, parents and families versus individuals are involved in a cult?

Tore KLEVJER: Individuals involved in a cult seldom contact us. It is usually individuals after they have left a cult that contact us. But it would probably be two-thirds parents and concerned families that contact us, as opposed to approximately one-third of actual people who have been in a cult. So it is quite significant.

The CHAIR: Yes. And can you talk to us about the impacts that cults and high-control groups have on families?

Tore KLEVJER: The cult mindset is that they want to become your family and there is no room for other family. So it is a pretty common earmark, if not universal, for cults to at some stage separate their members from their families, especially if their families are in any way antagonistic. We recommend that families just stay quiet, love their relative, love their child and wait for an opportunity to talk, because to show any kind of resistance or any kind of argument against the group that they are in will usually result in being cut off from your relative, sometimes to the point of shifting them to another country or another city so you do not have any access. So yes, families are torn apart. Mothers call me; they are on the phone saying, 'What can we do? There must be something we can do,' and I just ask them, 'Is your child over the age of 18?' Legally there is not much we can do at all. I have been involved in some exit counselling situations where I have gone and spoken to

people's relatives and kids, trying to get them out of the group, but that is a very time consuming and involved process usually, and we just simply do not have the time or the resources to do that. But yes, the impact is absolutely huge. To watch a family member that you used to have a loving, close relationship with slip away, not want to talk to you and treat you like the enemy is devastating.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. I will hand over to Cindy now too. Thanks, Cindy.

Cindy McLEISH: Thank you very much. Thank you for presenting today. I wanted, first of all, just to get a little bit of clarification. Earlier you mentioned lost years in a cult and people not having some life skills to get a job or apply for Centrelink. We have heard from the Geelong Revival Centre, for example, that everybody in that cult worked. They might have been restricted from extending their friendship networks into work or any other area. But are there some cults that do not allow you to work, and if so, which ones are those compared to those that you think might allow you to work?

Tore KLEVJER: Yes. That is a really good point, and it does operate on a continuum. Many cults do allow people to work. Jehovah's Witnesses operate in society and they work, so that situation does not necessarily apply so much to them. Groups such as the Twelve Tribes are a communal group. The Children of God were, as a communal group, completely separated from society. Groups like these are on the extreme end of coercive control because a member is monitored 24 hours a day in that situation. So I suppose I am speaking a little bit from personal experience there because, yes, when I came back into society, it was an absolute nightmare trying to figure out what I was going to do. In the Shincheonji cult, people's educations are completely disrupted as well. They will drop out of their courses or they will cut back on their courses, and when they do, their peers move forward into the next grade, into the next year, and they are left behind. So yes, I would have to think a little bit more around the more extreme cults that isolate people. But in the past we have had things like Jonestown and these isolationist groups that that really applies to more so. I suppose in the other groups, like the Revival Centre and things like that, it is more the other side of things, such as the mental control, the psychological manipulation, the guilt and shame that they feel when they come out.

Cindy McLEISH: Are there any universities that you know of that do any awareness around cults, and I do not just mean in Australia but anywhere worldwide?

Tore KLEVJER: Not really ongoing active awareness – I think it is Swinburne in Melbourne that has really taken some good advice over Shincheonji and produced some flyers and things for their students. There is a student council or something that oversees student welfare in all universities in Australia. The name of that organisation eludes me at the moment, but they are very aware of this as well, and I have had talks with them. I do not know how much is actually happening there, but more needs to happen in that space, for sure.

Cindy McLEISH: All right. Thanks very much. If you come up with any more thoughts around that, we are happy to hear of them as well as of any other very controlling cults on the far end of that continuum. I would be very happy to get that extra information if it comes to mind. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Just a question to clarify, the national student representative body, would that be the National Union of Students? .

Tore KLEVJER: I would have to look at my notes. I am not sure.

The CHAIR: That is okay. And just to confirm, that was Swinburne University as well that you mentioned before?

Tore KLEVJER: Yes.

The CHAIR: Yes. Fantastic. Great. We might wrap up our session here. Tore, can I say thank you very much for appearing before the committee today and for your contribution to the inquiry. We greatly appreciate the time and effort that you have taken to prepare your evidence today.

You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check, and verified transcripts will be published on the committee's website. Once again, on behalf of the committee, thank you very much for your support of this inquiry.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witness withdrew.