

# TRANSCRIPT

## 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

Annabelle Cleeland – Deputy Chair

Chris Couzens

John Lister

Cindy McLeish

Jackson Taylor

Rachel Westaway

#### WITNESSES

Mike Southon, Executive Director (*via videoconference*), and

Kojo Akomeah, Board Member, Freedom for Faith.

**The CHAIR:** 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 Woiwurrung 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 who are with us 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 online joining us, Annabelle Cleeland, the Member for Euroa and Deputy Chair; and Cindy McLeish, the Member for Eildon.

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.

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 freedoms and 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. 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 with the inquiry thus far, particularly the individuals and families who have bravely shared their personal experiences with cults and organised fringe groups.

This afternoon the committee will hear from Freedom for Faith, represented by Mike Southon, Executive Director, and Kojo Akomeah, Board Member. Thank you to Mike and Kojo for appearing before the committee today.

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. I will hand over to Mike and Kojo to provide an opening statement.

**Mike SOUTHON:** I will let Kojo introduce himself first.

**Kojo AKOMEAH:** My name is Kojo Akomeah. I am a pastor with the Seventh-day Adventist Church. You are probably aware the Seventh-day Adventist Church has about 65,000 members here in Australia and we have about 450 churches. We also have about 48 schools and about 17,000 students altogether. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is one of the oldest organisations that have been promoting religious liberty around the world. In fact we have a magazine called *Liberty* magazine, which is actually the oldest magazine that has been published on religious freedom, continuing to share themes and topics about religious freedom.

You are probably wondering where the name comes from. Kojo means I was born on a Monday, and Akomeah is basically the family name. I came here to Australia about 17 years ago. I trained as a pastor in the UK, so some of the words that I speak may sound a bit English, but I have got my African accent. I have been working as a pastor here in Melbourne and also in Adelaide. We were in Adelaide a few years ago and we relocated back to Melbourne just recently. Like Mike said earlier, yes, I am a member of Freedom for Faith. The Seventh-day Adventist Church are one of the founders of Freedom for Faith, and we like to advocate for religious freedom for those who believe and those who do not believe. Thank you.

**Mike SOUTHON:** Thanks, Kojo. I would like to start by saying that I personally do not believe that this inquiry was set up as a Trojan Horse to target conservative faith communities. I do not. However, there is real

fear amongst faith communities, including Kojo's communities, that there are real risks with this inquiry. As we outlined in our submission, the definition of a cult in the guidance note – especially the list of behaviours – is open to significant scope creep. Since the inquiry was announced, I have had dozens of religious organisations contact us, big and small, some of them with quite fringe beliefs, but some of whom are the very definition of mainstream – we are talking Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, Presbyterian, Adventist, Pentecostal, Muslim groups, as well as other minority faiths – all of whom are concerned about the potential direction that this inquiry could take. Some have expressed the fear that this inquiry was intentionally set up to target them. Others just fear the potential for scope creep, especially of the definitions of harm and coercion. We have seen a little bit of that in the testimonies. Some of the witnesses I have watched have been talking about the Family, which committed multiple crimes, or the Korean cult – I am not going to try and pronounce their name – who hide their beliefs and even say that they are not part of the group. But other witnesses name-checked some of the biggest churches in Australia, whose statement of faith is up on their websites and their processes are there for all to see.

There is palpable fear in our faith communities that we will end up with a process where deep devotion to your faith is considered coercion, where personal sacrifice and giving are deemed abuse, where commitment to a single universal truth is labelled intolerance, where belief in eternal consequences is coercion and where traditional morality is declared to be harm. In that environment, any religion could be declared a cult, investigated by a commission or doxxed into a hotline. That starts a hugely expensive process where the process is the punishment. It opens the media assault, and we have already seen that in response to testimony from yesterday. That is the fear that we are hearing consistently from a wide range of faith communities. That is the fear that I am actually hoping this committee can allay, so that we can get rid of those fears. So I am looking forward to this conversation. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Kojo and Mike, for your opening statements. Can I also thank you for your honesty in terms of relaying some of those fears that the communities you represent have come to you with. On behalf of the committee, I do want to assure you that this is not about investigating one particular group or another. That is certainly not its intention, and nor is our committee work about judging people's beliefs, questioning people's beliefs, or impacting people's right to religious freedom. We are focused on behaviours of groups and the coercive behaviours that can be prevalent in Victoria. I do hope, Mike and Kojo, that this conversation can help allay some of those fears, and we would be open to an ongoing conversation with you and the people that you are representing as well throughout this process if you do have concerns in the future.

I am going to start with a pretty big question which goes to the heart of the conversation that we would like to have with you today. How can the Victorian government respond appropriately to coercive, high-control groups in a way that protects vulnerable individuals but also safeguards the freedom of religion?

**Mike SOUTHON:** You do not start small, do you?

**The CHAIR:** No. I did warn you, though.

**Mike SOUTHON:** Yes. Carefully – would be my first answer. There is a lot of risk, particularly in legal definitions and specific definitions, of scope creep. We have seen this in other forms of legislation which have sought to protect a specific harm, but in defining that harm they have had to draw the circle a little bit bigger and they start capturing other forms of behaviour. This is something that we always have to deal with with legislation.

Another initial thought that I have is not focusing on religion. I did note conversation from previous testimony about the concept of group-based coercion and the reality that group-based coercion actually happens in all sorts of groups and so the focus could be on, as I think Mr Klevjer said, the illegal behaviour itself. It is impossible to police thought, and it is almost impossible to police speech. People want to build communities. People want to build communities that are close, that are intimate and that rely on each other. They want communities where there is solidarity and where they all agree that they all believe the same thing, political parties being a perfect example of this. So those are a couple of guiding posts. I am not claiming it is an easy solution, but I think particularly focusing on countering actual illegal behaviour rather than trying to prevent environments that you think illegal behaviour could be coming out of, which would then capture a whole lot of legitimate behaviour at the same time.

**The CHAIR:** Would you like to add to that, Kojo?

**Kojo AKOMEAH:** Yes. First of all, yes, it is really important, the work that you are doing, because you are seeking to make sure that Victorians do not suffer harm as a result of being involved in a cult. It is not the easiest task. I am trying to understand where coercion is actually defined. I think defining coercion is probably one of the challenges. I think once we can define what coercion is, that would probably make it easier to be able to then target groups that are coercing people into conformity.

**The CHAIR:** You have certainly identified one of the challenges that we are grappling with, which is around definitions. There is no legal definition of a cult, and that makes this work that we are doing very challenging.

Just to expand a bit further around the balance between protecting vulnerable Victorians and safeguarding religious freedoms, what do you see as the main barriers in achieving this balance, and are there safeguards or mechanisms that the Victorian government should consider in striving to do this?

**Kojo AKOMEAH:** I can start, Mike, and you can add to it.

**Mike SOUTHON:** You go, Kojo.

**Kojo AKOMEAH:** When I first read the criteria for this inquiry, one of the things that stood out to me was how similar the descriptions for cults are to mainstream religion – for example, talking about commitment. In our church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, members are encouraged because of their faith to return tithe to God, for example, and it is not something that we actually force. It is not enforced, people are not compelled to do that, but I saw that listed in the criteria. So in my mind I was thinking, okay, so where do we draw the line between people voluntarily offering money to a religious organisation and people actually being influenced negatively to donate and to make some kind of financial sacrifice for an exclusive religious organisation?

That was one of the things that stood out to me. The other thing that stood out to me was to do with time – the time commitment that religious groups and their members put in to keep the organisation running is quite a lot, and it involves some sort of sacrifice. Obviously this is something that people are not paid for, this is something that they do voluntarily, and for the Seventh-day Adventist Church, for example, we worship on the seventh day, which is the Sabbath. We consider it as the Sabbath, and so in our church our members will typically not work on the seventh day, Friday sunset to Saturday sunset. This is, again, based on our belief that God created the earth in six days and rested on the seventh, so you will discover that when it comes to Friday sunset, members of the church will typically not engage in work or activities that they consider not spiritual, for example, and so in my mind I am thinking would that be too close to being called a cult? This is what ran through my mind as I was reading the criteria for this inquiry. So these are some of the questions that I have been actually wrestling with over the past few weeks as I have been thinking about this.

**Mike SOUTHON:** If you are talking about frameworks that we need to be thinking through, I think international human rights is one of the first frameworks that we want to be dealing with, so the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, article 18, but also the Siracusa Principles for interpreting those rights. Religious freedom – not just religious freedom but the freedom of association and the freedom of your beliefs, whatever they be, religious or otherwise – is actually held to be one of the highest and most protected freedoms in the ICCPR. It is one of the few that is non-derogable, which means it cannot be overridden in states of emergency. You can only override or limit these where they are absolutely necessary. So ‘necessary’ is a very strong concept in international law as opposed to proportionate or appropriate. The Siracusa Principles will talk about it being necessary and least intrusive to be able to achieve the aim that you are going for, so that could be a starting point in thinking about what we do to limit not just religious freedom but freedom of conscience and freedom of belief.

I do note when you are talking about – you are saying you are not going after beliefs, you are going after behaviours, but there is an undeniable blurring between belief and behaviour. If we have got a belief that – I will be grabbing examples from all sorts of faiths as I go along, but if you believe that Jesus is the only way to God and anyone who does not have a relationship with Jesus does not have eternal life with God, then that is going to fundamentally affect your behaviour. Now, is that coercive? These are the problems that you have to work with, because if you are going to define the belief in uniqueness of a faith and the need to be attached to that faith in order to have eternal salvation, then the vast majority of Christians, Muslims, conservative Jews

and a whole bunch of other faiths are automatically coercive, so that is a very concerning pathway to take. It is a pathway that was hinted at by a couple of the witnesses when they talked about the coercive effect of talking about eternal consequences. How do we define behaviours that are cult-like and harmful while not actually saying that these beliefs themselves are harmful? I do not envy you in your attempt to do that, to be honest, but you do need to protect the rights of people to be able to believe these things and to be able to teach each other these things and have communities that believe these things.

**The CHAIR:** Two things I will just add to that: firstly, a comment, Mike, on what you were just saying with regard to religious freedoms and their protections. Early into this inquiry the committee sought a briefing from the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission. The notes from that briefing are available on our website, so please feel free to take a look at those. That gave us a really important framing as well around the Victorian charter of human rights and how that protects religious freedoms. I mention that because I do want to assure you that religious freedoms have been a top-of-mind consideration for this committee from the start of our deliberations.

I just have a follow up question relating to what you mentioned, Kojo. You were speaking about that line and where is that line crossed. You spoke about how members of your church voluntarily provide a tithe to your church, and I know that that is a very common practice across many churches in Victoria and internationally. I guess my question is: when that tithe becomes a compulsory requirement to participate in spiritual life, to participate in worship in that church, is that when it then crosses a line, in your opinion?

**Kojo AKOMEAH:** If members are being forced to contribute money, then I think there is a problem there. This is why I think the work that you are doing is so important. Because as an organisation, or as a faith, the last thing we want to do is to cause harm to anyone. People are free to participate, and at no point are they restricted when they want to leave. It is open to all, and people come and go all the time. But I guess it is like with any family, whether you are a member of the Labor Party or the Liberal conservatives, once you are part of that group, you always have a bit of difficulty when you are leaving, in terms of the relationships that you formed. But I do not think at any point you feel like you are pressured, so people give money voluntarily. But when it is forced, then it becomes a problem. Anytime there is force or compulsion, then I think it is bordering on something that is not free. So there is no freedom there, and we represent Freedom for Faith.

**The CHAIR:** Well put. Thank you. Christine.

**Chris COUZENS:** Thank you, Kojo and Mike, for your presentation today and the information you have provided. I think we are all on the same page: it is just how it is defined, and when it causes harm, then there is a problem – I think we have identified that with some of your comments today – but also when it is physical and sexual abuse. I think we are all on the same page. This is how we get to something in the end. What role could public policy play in raising awareness of cultic abuse without stigmatising religion or spiritual communities more broadly?

**Mike SOUTHON:** I have been thinking about this, particularly listening to testimony earlier today about information and training and things like that. I hesitate to draw the parallel, because there is by no means a perfect parallel, but the royal commission into systemic responses to child abuse is an interesting parallel. The first thing to note is that it found all sorts of significant problems in a whole lot of faith groups. It also found systematic problems in a whole lot of secular groups and that this sort of abusive behaviour is not unique. It does not actually define something to be a cult or something to be a bad organisation. We found abuse within the military. We found some fairly well-publicised abuse within political parties as well. I happen to live in the electorate of Hughes, where the chief of staff of my former MP has been convicted. What came out of the royal commission was a need to enforce the laws that actually already exist – abusing children is illegal, and we need to be able to actually investigate that properly – but then also talking about how we equip all these organisations who had no idea that there was the potential for systematic harm, who did not know how to protect themselves and who would never have wanted it in a million years. How do we train, equip and resource them to prevent that from happening in the future? I think that is a helpful analogy.

I do have some concerns around training, or at least mandated training. The question around mandated training would be: who gets to mandate the content? Again, we have heard witnesses implying that the teaching of eternal consequences for lack of faith is coercive, so is the government going to create training that actually says, ‘Well, you can’t teach about hell. Hell is coercive. You can’t teach about hell’? There are constant

discussions about the potential harm caused by various forms of sexual morality held by large amounts of conservative mainstream religions. Are they harmful? Is the training going to say you now cannot even teach or believe these things because they are harmful? That is the caution that I sound.

Providing the ability for all organisations to have resources to understand what is group-based coercion, and how we can have good systems that prevent it. I was a children and youth minister for the first 10 years of my ministry life, and I lived the life and indeed was a trainer for child protection. It is a pain doing that training every year, but it is so important. As we informed the church, this is a way that you can keep your people safer and keep them in the faith and not leaving the faith because they have suffered trauma. I think this is where public policy could be most useful: providing the resources that these organisations can then voluntarily pick up because they want to be safe places.

**Chris COUZENS:** Great. Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** Any further questions from you, Christine?

**Chris COUZENS:** No. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Great. Rachel.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** Thank you both for your comments. You spoke about behaviour that perhaps we should not be looking at in terms of cult-like behaviour, but what is the sort of behaviour, in your mind, that we should be looking at? If people choose to make a financial contribution, that is fine, but is there anything else that comes at you in terms of the scope of what we are looking at that you think is important that we should discuss?

**Mike SOUTHON:** I think most of the behaviour we would want to restrain is already illegal in one sense. It is already illegal to stalk somebody. It is already illegal to sexually abuse somebody. It is already illegal to hurt somebody physically, and things like that. Again, in the discussions about the Family beforehand, the problem was not whether what they were doing was illegal or not, it was a problem in the prosecution. I do not understand the details of the case, so I cannot speak on it, but there have been high-profile cases of religious leaders being prosecuted for their crimes, and that is a good thing. So –

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** Could I ask you then a question about the treatment of women in terms of what they wear and whether they are of equal status to men. In Australia there is an expectation that women are treated equally to men, that they hold the same status. However, in certain religious groups or cults women's roles are positioned in a more demeaning manner. That is my take on it. Could you give me your view on that? Because we are talking about legislation and what is deemed to be legal, but there are some religious organisations that do require women to behave differently to men.

**Mike SOUTHON:** There are lots of religious organisations that teach things that I find abhorrent, and I am not going to go into what they are. But almost every mosque, if not every mosque, in Sydney that I am aware of has a men's door and a women's door because that is how they worship. The difference in the sexes is something which is baked into a large number of faith groups. I have my own personal views on the theology of that, and that is not my job. My job is not to say, 'I don't like something, therefore I need to police it.' There are a lot of political –

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** No, I am not suggesting that – that is probably our job – but I would value your input.

**Mike SOUTHON:** I do not think it is any of our jobs. There are political parties who hold beliefs that I find absolutely abhorrent too, and I do not want to police them. I think this is in the space of freedom, freedom of belief and freedom for people to have beliefs which we just strongly disagree with, and 'I don't like the way you do this. You don't like the way I do that. But we have the right to actually have that.' If the women are not physically coerced – again, I cannot put myself in the mind of, say, in that example a Muslim woman who is trying to keep faithful to her faith, and I am not going to tell her how she should or how she should not do that.

**Kojo AKOMEAH:** To add to what Mike is saying, I think when it comes to abuse, then that should not be tolerated in any organisation. I think where there is abuse, that is clear that there is something not quite right

and it is actually breaking the law. I think if we are having a policy, then the policy should clearly delineate and spell out that abuse in all of its forms is not acceptable.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Over to you, John.

**John LISTER:** Thank you, and thank you, Kojo and Mike, for joining us today. Before I put to you my question, I just wanted to give you a little bit of context. In thinking about what I might ask you today, I turned my mind to an interaction I had with a Baptist minister from one of my local congregations a few months ago at an event. I explained that I was on this committee and what we were looking into. This minister said, 'Yes, we have heard of these things, and they are happening in our congregations. Different groups are either on the edge of the congregation or trying to become part of it to then bring people into a different congregation.' And he said it is a real worry for them. Now, they are a Baptist church, well regarded, and well regulated I suppose you would say, but it is happening there. My first question to both of you is: have there been concerns raised with you by the members of these different, very mainstream Christian groups and other religious groups about this kind of practice happening?

**Mike SOUTHON:** Yes. I will speak briefly and let Kojo speak. I am on ministry Facebook groups, and particularly that Korean cult and parallels of them – I have been Facebooked by young people trying to ask me to go join a Bible study. It is a real conversation about these really quite fringe groups seeking to recruit quite aggressively. Kojo?

**John LISTER:** Yes, I am curious about the SDA experience as well.

**Kojo AKOMEAH:** Yes. Going back into history, we had the Catholic Church and then I think in the 1500s Martin Luther decided that he was not happy with what was going on in the church, so he decided to start his own – well, not quite. He nailed *The Ninety-Five Theses* to the church door and that started the Protestant reformation. Since that time, I wonder how many Christian denominations and sects there are. There are so many, and I do not think it is going to stop anytime soon. I have discovered that once there is an established organisation, if people are not happy with the leadership sometimes, then they try to get people from that central organisation and then try to start their own. I do not think that is going to stop. I think what should be the concern is what kind of practices they are using to try and recruit the members. If it is through intimidation, through bribery or whatever, or deceit, then I think there is a problem. But if people are leaving voluntarily, then I think we need to respect people's choice.

**John LISTER:** I think this comes to one of the areas that I have been thinking about around how mainstream religions are regulating their ministry, so to speak. I was talking about regulating ministry as sometimes a bit contradictory, but we have seen out of the royal commission a lot of policies and guidelines around what ministry looks like, not just in a child safe perspective but in what it actually looks like. I know we are not necessarily here to talk about specific religions, but I would call out the Presbyterian Church, which has their safe church policy which acknowledges and accepts the trust granted to it by those taking part in church activities. The Baptist Union has a very, very detailed code of ethics, including pastoral leaders and members of society, and therefore subject to the laws of the state, which is a really positive thing to see when we have seen some of the examples from these fringe groups where that is explicitly challenged in what they preach. We have spoken about that concern that mainstream religious groups have, but what are some of the patterns and signs that people of faith can recognise that indicate a shift from potentially legitimate religious practice to potentially harmful conduct? What are some of those patterns or signs?

**Mike SOUTHON:** I think a lot of the signs actually would parallel the training that we have already received on recognising grooming and grooming behaviours. You can have theological grooming just as much as you can have sexual. I think the point that was made previously by Mr Klevjer was about deception. Not being who you say you are and putting forward one theological face and then moving people to another theological face. Again, I am not advocating that you could somehow define this in a legal way and prosecute somebody for doing it. But if I was educating my church as to how to notice these sorts of things, this is the sort of thing that I would be informing my church to be paying attention to. I think a lot of the information that has come from this inquiry in the past few days can be put together as a very helpful resource in how to recognise this.

In every denomination, large or small, we do not want somebody sneaking – in fact the Bible talks about wolves in sheep's clothing who will come amongst the flock and will deceive you. We have got a theological mandate to be discerning in what we believe and in our theology and to protect our flock from deceivers. I think as a starting point those are things to identify. And then of course there is there is the grooming stuff, which would be like treating somebody as extra special, pulling them aside, trying to work towards having a one-to-one relationship that cuts them away from the rest of the church. These sorts of behaviours. Kojo?

**John LISTER:** Yes, I am curious to hear your experience.

**Kojo AKOMEAH:** I think the onus is on the leadership to try and protect their congregation. I think that goes across whether it is a business organisation or whether it is a not-for-profit or whatever. We have oversight over what happens within our sphere of influence. I would say that the responsibility rests on the leadership to make sure that people are not coming in, pretending to be to be sheep when they are wolves. Whether it is the Islamic faith or Buddhist or Hindu, it is important that we protect people. Because I think as leaders we have a responsibility to ensure that our people do not suffer harm, and that includes protecting their welfare in terms of their theological understanding as well as trying to make sure that their finances are not siphoned off. I think the leadership is really important in this realm.

**John LISTER:** And I think this goes to one of my final questions that is probably more to provoke a bit of a thought as well. We have spoken about church leadership in this context, having that leadership around calling that out and challenging it when you see it in your own congregations. But the issue we have seen is a lot of this behaviour, particularly from sects or organisations in Victoria, is they are not necessarily in communion or in those different groups. They are just on the edge. They may have similar faith practices but they are not in communion with those other, broader groups. How then does the state play a role in making sure that good practice that is being upheld by other religious groups is also something that can be reinforced or modelled for other groups that may not be in communion or may not be one of your members of Freedom for Faith or whatever lobby that they can join? How does the state then fill that role? Because when all else fails, unfortunately, our system says that the state is there. How do we do that?

**Kojo AKOMEAH:** I will have a crack at this. I think the state does very well in trying to protect the interests of children. I think if you look at the way the state has handled historical child sex abuses and how it always puts the best interest of the child first – obviously children come first. I think we can actually borrow some of the principles and apply them to this case as well. Again, going back to leadership, if leadership has an oversight and is actually doing the work of looking after its flock, then I think it is important that the leadership is able to discern what is going on and act on it based on, like, the government has got obviously, as Mike mentioned, training and opportunities to be able to receive counselling and policies that actually help us. I think we can borrow the principles and apply them.

**John LISTER:** Yes. I appreciate that.

**Mike SOUTHON:** Yes.

**John LISTER:** Oh, yes, sorry, Mike.

**Mike SOUTHON:** I was just going to say it is a tricky question. I have got a couple of half-formed thoughts which I would like to form more before I –

**John LISTER:** Yes. We can take it on notice too.

**Mike SOUTHON:** It would be great to chat again. But – no, I will just leave it there.

**John LISTER:** If you want to come back to us, we can work that out. Thanks, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Just to both of you, Mike and Kojo, if there are things that you would like to come back to us on following today's conversation, we would be very happy to receive further correspondence from you both or on behalf of your organisation. I will hand over to Annabelle.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Thanks, Mike and Kojo. I apologise for having my video off. I am intently listening, I just have shocking reception. I want to ask both of you whether you feel that we can legislate



coercive control without impacting religious freedoms. I know it has been asked in various forms today, but just to understand your views.

**Mike SOUTHON:** Yes. You have asked this at everything today.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** So you are prepared.

**Mike SOUTHON:** Well, I am as unprepared as I was before, because the answer is it is very, very tricky and you have to be very, very careful. You have had different witnesses, one who said, 'Yes, of course you can, it would be easy as pie', and another cult expert saying this would be incredibly difficult and he does not recommend it. Coercive control has been legislated in New South Wales when it comes to domestic contexts, so it is doable. Defining organisational coercive control in such a way that it is not (a) targeted at religions and (b) does not capture a whole lot of other groups I fear is nigh on impossible to do. It is easier to do if you then just start off by saying we are only looking at religious coercion, and then we can just kind of not worry about the unintended consequences and move on, but you do not want to do that. If you start trying to legislate against organisational coercive control, how does that apply to cabinet solidarity? That is a silly example, but there are vast number of organisations that have got a strong common set of beliefs and encourage their people to really passionately commit their lives. I am thinking, you know, of extinction revolution and all sorts of organisations, left and right and centre. How do you define when an organisation or a movement who are passionate and want people to be passionate about something that they think is an existential threat – when does that become coercive? I think the job is much harder than others would like to think it is, I am afraid.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Kojo, did you want to contribute?

**Kojo AKOMEAH:** Yes –

**Mike SOUTHON:** If I may, I just wanted to add one small other point, which was: most of the abuses – I would argue all of the abuses – that we have seen in religious contexts are when a strong-knit community then gets abused by the individual, who then uses that to abuse people, and that is more identifiable. When an individual is starting to use coercive control over another individual, that is a far more identifiable criminal act than the community itself somehow being coercive.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** I might go on to my next question, Kojo, unless you have got something pressing that you wanted to contribute. We have also been asking, as you, Mike, have been listening in throughout the inquiry, about understanding religious groups and cults in terms of their wealth, that financial transaction and the transparency around that. I am sure the secretariat has a much more articulate question for me to ask, but I am trying to, I guess, get your feedback and your life views on whether there should be greater transparency around religious groups and charities to protect them from appearing like a cult. Does that make sense?

**Mike SOUTHON:** I get what you are saying. I mean –

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Transparency will, you know, protect you.

**Mike SOUTHON:** I report to the ACNC; we have to do these sorts of things as our organisation. I do not know if the word 'more' is necessarily appropriate. I actually could not say in detail what transparency requires, but basic religious charities should be able to account for their finances as a general principle. But I do not know if that is not the case or if in cults' examples they are actually already illegally bypassing what they are supposed to be doing.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Kojo, I am just waiting for you to chip in at any stage if you would like to contribute.

**Kojo AKOMEAH:** Can I just go back to your previous question, and then maybe I will start with this as well. In terms of trying to make sure that the religious organisations can still function and at the same time protect Victorians from harm, I think maybe we can start by ensuring that what Mike said in terms of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, article 18 – if we can just start with that and say, 'Okay, right, we're not going to change this or water this down in any way, and whatever we are going to do is going to make sure this stands,' I think that would be a good starting point, because we recognise that those who believe have religious freedom and those who do not believe should be protected as well. If we say, 'Okay,

right, article 18 will not change, will not be watered down, will not be infringed on,' if that forms the foundation, then I think that will be a good start in my opinion.

In terms of finances, I was not actually aware that religious organisations were not transparent, because I thought our church was quite transparent.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** I did not mean to sound like that. I was just thinking that if you, you know – Mike has been listening to the inquiry quite substantially, and a lot of submissions have spoken about the volume of money that has been donated to religious groups and cults separately. I was just asking whether there is an opportunity for maybe greater transparency, but if you are saying it is already there, that is – sorry to interrupt.

**Kojo AKOMEAH:** I am not aware. Maybe there is something that I do not know, but –

**Mike SOUTHON:** We will take that on notice to see what concerns there are. But I think our belief is that our churches at least are required to be fairly transparent.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Yes, it could be more of a charity protection. I have a final question, which you can take on notice as well. You have been closely listening to the inquiry. This is a bit of a dreaming of the recommendations that might appear, but do you have any concerns about some potential recommendations and the impact they might have on people of faith?

**Mike SOUTHON:** I would be concerned when recommendations start reaching into what we teach and what we believe, even when what we teach and what we believe are not mainstream beliefs. I work with a lot of quite obscure and fringe religious groups who teach things that I would never subscribe to in a million years. But when we start saying that the only way for you to be safe is to stop saying what you are saying, to stop believing what you are believing, that would be a significant problem.

**The CHAIR:** Kojo, please.

**Kojo AKOMEAH:** I think from our teaching, and I think Mike would agree with this, the state obviously has a responsibility, and we believe that God has set up the government to look after the welfare of people. We respect what the government is doing to try and help and make sure that people do not suffer harm. But we also believe that the church and religious groups have a responsibility to people as well. How do we make sure that church and state remain separate? I guess that is the task that we are working on.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Can I just quickly address particularly, Mike, your concerns around recommendations that step into teachings. I just want to remind you of the terms of reference, which are around 'the methods used to recruit and control members and the impacts of coercive control'. We are bound by our terms of reference. We are sticking very closely to our terms of reference. They are not about making recommendations about how scripture is taught, how religion is taught or what people believe in. I do want to provide that reassurance.

**Mike SOUTHON:** I definitely appreciate what you are saying, and I get what you are saying. However, there has been enough testimony talking about specific religious teachings being harmful or specific religious teachings being coercive that the note needs to be sounded.

**The CHAIR:** Absolutely, Mike, and this is also the point of today and our hearings this week. Parliamentary hearings are an important opportunity for committees to hear from different individuals with different perspectives and experiences, and we do that so that we have a broad and balanced understanding of the issues that we are investigating and inquiring into.

**Mike SOUTHON:** I appreciate that.

**The CHAIR:** I will hand over to Jackson now.

**Jackson TAYLOR:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much, Mike and Kojo, for your time and coming in today, whether in person or on Zoom. I note particularly the comments and concerns raised by you, Kojo, and this is open to both of you to answer if you would like to add. You were talking about the definitional differences between cults and mainstream religions. What in your view are those clear definitional differences?

**Kojo AKOMEAH:** I think control. Usually when you have a cult, my understanding is you usually have a central, oftentimes very charismatic, leader who then controls people. There is an element of control that the members or those who actually participate in that cult group may not be comfortable with but are not able to say because of the pressure that comes from being part of that group. I think in most mainstream religions we do not have a central figure who actually controls everything, so that is one indicator, where you have one person who everybody kind of bows down to and is doing it because they are afraid. Where fear is involved and intimidation, then I think that is an early sign to pick up that there might be issues at stake here.

**Jackson TAYLOR:** Thanks, Kojo.

**Mike SOUTHON:** But in what Kojo has said it is really quite clear that it is a spectrum, and other witnesses have said it is a spectrum. I think there is a real problem with trying to create a term 'cult' and define that term 'cult' and then decide who you are going to pour into that bucket and therefore you are going to treat them in a certain way. That is why I was more supportive of Mr Klevjer's point that you have got to focus on the illegal behaviour. Do not label the group. Recently the Prime Minister himself labelled a minority faith group as a cult. I am not commenting on that case in any way. It is a word that is easily thrown around and then turned into a pejorative attack, and indeed there have been news articles based on yesterday's testimony which are attaching the word 'cult' to some pretty mainstream churches. I would personally caution against the word 'cult' pretty much at all and say, 'Well, how do we allow communities to be safe, have people inside them being safe?' And then how do we identify these individuals who are abusive individuals?' The Family, whether you are going to call it a cult or not, was adults who were breaking the law and being abusive individuals. I think this process of define 'cult' and then figure out who fits in it is exactly what we are afraid of, because that is where the scope creep leads.

**Jackson TAYLOR:** Thank you both. My final question is that your submission acknowledges the importance of individuals being free to enter, question and leave communities without facing intimidation, manipulation or punishment. What steps should the Victorian government take when groups fail to respect or uphold these rights?

**Kojo AKOMEAH:** I think the law comes in. I think if there is a failure to uphold certain standards, then obviously there need to be consequences. One of the things that crossed my mind was the theme that is often championed on specific days of the year raising awareness about particular issues. For example, R U OK? Day. That gives people the ability to ask difficult questions, taking advantage of the theme of the day. I think raising awareness and suggesting that people are free to be able to talk about issues that they might not be comfortable talking about all year except on this particular day gives an opportunity to do that. I think that will help raise awareness about this issue. I am not sure if I am answering your question. Your question was about –

**Jackson TAYLOR:** What steps should the Victorian government take when groups fail to respect and uphold the rights around individuals being free to enter, question and leave communities without facing intimidation, manipulation or punishment?

**Kojo AKOMEAH:** Yes. I think the law has to take over.

**Mike SOUTHON:** And surely we have laws. Again, if somebody is choosing to leave a faith and another member of that faith decides to intimidate them, that is an individual committing a crime against another individual, and we have got laws for that. Again, I am very, very concerned about the idea of legislating how a community acts when we actually have laws to deal with individuals who are doing terrible things, and those laws should apply with the full force of the law. If someone was leaving my church and somebody else decided to stalk them, I would be the first one to bring them to the police, but I do not think you can police communities in the same way.

**Jackson TAYLOR:** Thanks, Mike. Thanks, Kojo. Thanks, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** We will wrap up the hearing here. Thank you to Mike and to Kojo. Thank you so much for appearing before the committee today and for your contribution to this inquiry. We greatly appreciate the time and effort that you have both taken to prepare your evidence, so we do want to thank you very much for that. You will be provided with a proof version of today's transcript, together with any questions taken on notice. Verified transcripts and responses to questions taken on notice will then be published on the committee's website. Once again, thank you.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**