

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

Annabelle Cleeland – Deputy Chair

Chris Couzens

John Lister

Cindy McLeish

Jackson Taylor

Rachel Westaway

WITNESSES

Jasmine Yuen, Victorian Director, and

Reverend Phi Duong, Senior Pastor, Western New Community Baptist Church, Australian
Christian Lobby.

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 am joined by my colleagues today: Rachel Westaway, the Member for Prahran; John Lister, the Member for Werribee; Jackson Taylor, the Member for Bayswater; Cindy McLeish, the Member for Eildon; and Annabelle Cleeland, Member for Euroa and Deputy Chair.

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 witnesses to keep the terms of reference in mind when providing their evidence today. 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 behaviours 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.

Today the committee will hear from representatives of the Australian Christian Lobby. We are joined by Jasmine Yuen, Victorian Director; Reverend Phi Duong, Senior Pastor, Western New Community Baptist Church; and we will be joined shortly by Reverend Milton Oliver, Senior Pastor, ReChurch. I thank the representatives of the Australian Christian Lobby for joining us 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 welcome the witnesses from the Australian Christian Lobby. I will hand over to you to make an opening statement, and this will be followed by questions from members. Thank you.

Jasmine YUEN: Thank you so much. I think I will just read out my opening statement to save time.

The Australian Christian Lobby want to thank the committee for this opportunity for us to contribute to this important inquiry into cults and fringe groups. We acknowledge that there are indeed cults that have caused genuine harm and distress to individuals and families across Victoria. We extend our compassion to those affected and affirm our potential support for appropriate measures that prevent future harms. However, we do want to urge the committee to exercise caution in proposing new legislation aimed at regulating or controlling cults because, as outlined in our submission, existing Victorian laws already provide sufficient mechanism to address criminal or abusive conduct associated with cults. This includes the *Crimes Act*, the *Summary Offences Act*, the *Surveillance Devices Act* and the *Children, Youth and Families Act*. We believe prevention and education are far more effective than additional legislation. Building public awareness and resilience equips Victorians to discern and respond to harmful behaviour themselves. Over-regulation risks creating a bubble-wrap society, overprotected yet underprepared, depending on government protection instead of personal wisdom and responsibility.

Our greatest concern also lies in how cults and their practices would be defined, whether in law, by the courts or by the broader community. The inquiry's own guidelines acknowledge that the term 'cult' is difficult to define. Although the inquiry states that it will focus on practices rather than beliefs, from a theological perspective faith and practices are inseparable. Separating the two risks unfairly misclassifying legitimate faith communities, particularly Christian churches, as cults, whether through misunderstanding or deliberate misrepresentation. Such confusion could expose churches to unnecessary litigation or public defamation simply because some individual disagrees with their theology, teaching or discipleship practices.

Allow me to give some examples. In Matthew 10, Jesus said 'Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me.' These are calls to wholehearted discipleship, yet could such teaching be misinterpreted as coercive control?

In Matthew 19, Jesus declares, 'At the beginning the Creator made them male and female. For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife.' This foundational teaching affirms that humanity is created male and female and that marriage is between one man and one woman. Would upholding this biblical view of marriage and sexuality be labelled indoctrination?

The inquiry has referenced fear-based teachings or apocalyptic beliefs as potential signs of cultic experience, yet many Christians hold to a doctrine of eschatology that includes both the end of the world and the renewal of creation. Such beliefs are central to biblical theology. Would eschatology then be classified as cultic merely because it is not universally accepted?

These examples highlight the real danger of legislative overreach into matters of faith, doctrine and Christian practices. In the fourth century, when heresies arose in the early church, Emperor Constantine convened the First Council of Nicaea. Although state-initiated, it was the church leaders, not the government, who debated and defined Christian doctrine. Even then the Roman Emperor recognised that he was not qualified to decide what Christians should believe. That wisdom still applies today. It would be dangerous for any government, however well meaning, to step into theological territory or attempt to define legitimate belief.

In conclusion, the Australian Christian Lobby respectfully urges the committee to prioritise education and prevention over further legislation. Informed citizens, equipped with discernment and understanding, are the best defence against harm – not laws that risk encroaching upon faith and liberty. Protecting Victorians from harm is the shared goal, yet in doing so, we must ensure that we do not compromise the essential freedoms of religion, conscience and expression that define a healthy democracy. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Reverend Duong, do you want to add anything to that?

Phi DUONG: I think it is clear enough.

The CHAIR: No worries. Well, we will start with some questions then. Thank you very much for your opening statement, Jasmine.

Jasmine YUEN: Hold it – do you mean you want to read it?

Phi DUONG: Yes.

Jasmine YUEN: Oh, okay. Sorry

Phi DUONG: I thought you asked me about her idea.

The CHAIR: Please.

Phi DUONG: I support her idea. Okay. Thank you, committee, for the opportunity to share our thoughts on the inquiry into cults and organised fringe groups. My name is Reverend Phi Duong. I am Senior Pastor at Western New Community Baptist Church. I am also one of the seven Chinese pastors who sent in a joint submission to this inquiry. There are more than 60 Chinese churches across Victoria. Some, though not all, have experienced the negative impact of cult groups, such as Eastern Lightning, which have tried to recruit members from our church congregations. Over the years, pastors are able to recognise these groups. We can often identify them through their false teachings and unusual behaviours.

While we do share concerns about the harm cults can cause, many Chinese pastors are also very concerned about legislation that interferes with how churches operate and how we practise our Christian faith. Here in Victoria we already have laws that affect these areas, and our concern is that new laws aimed at controlling cults might also end up restricting legitimate Christian teaching and theology. We absolutely want to see people protected from manipulation and harm. But many Chinese pastors believe that more laws are not the right solutions. What we need instead is a balanced approach, one that protects people but also protects freedom of religion and the right for churches to teach the Bible without fear. Thank you again for listening and for considering the concerns of the Chinese church communities in Victoria. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Reverend. The first question I have for you, given your general support for this inquiry, is what outcomes would you see as constructive and appropriate to help prevent the harms caused by cults and coercive groups?

Jasmine YUEN: As mentioned in our submission and the opening statement, I think education and prevention is better. This is because it would actually help the community not only to define or identify cults, but to actually also prevent future harm. So it is not only this moment, but what it will be like in the near future.

The CHAIR: I think education, awareness and prevention is incredibly important for people, particularly before they might join a cult or a high-control group. But what about for people who might already be in that circumstance? How can Victoria protect those individuals from coercion, exploitation or harm that may occur when they are already in that group setting?

Jasmine YUEN: Yes, I think what our submission also mentioned is that they do need a support group, counselling, definitely. Whether it is to set up a counselling group for them or a rehab program for them to help them get through that emotional and psychological injury, I think that would be the best help for them.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Rachel.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you very much. I would like to just delve a little bit further into what the Chair was talking about in regard to your concerns about the introduction of new legislation. You have focused your submission and recommendations on our need to be more focused on education and victim support. But you talk about the need to recognise cults. You suggested education and public awareness campaigns, and also a reporting system. Your concern about legislation, in my understanding, is that it encroaches on faith and liberty. But the Chair did ask about what you would do about those people that are in cults at the moment, because education and the programs that you are suggesting are very, very valuable, but people that are in cults or coercive groups at the moment have a right to be protected. You mentioned counselling, but you cannot counsel inside a group that will not allow you inside the group. So is there room in your mind for some form of legislative amendments or recognition of legislation, such as coercive control being recognised as a form of abuse, because it is already recognised within family law, it is already recognised within the Migration Act, so it is not something that is new to our legislative system.

Jasmine YUEN: I do not think any new legislation will help because, as you mentioned, for those who are already in the cult, even if there was legislation, as you say, some of them are so brainwashed that if they cannot recognise that it is a cult, they would not be able to make good use of it. In the end, education and helping people to identify what a cult is is the best. Unless they know what the cult is or that they are actually inside the cult, they will not be able to use legislation or report that an institution is a cult to anyone. So in a way, even though there is legislation, if the person in there is unaware that they are in a cult, pretty much that law will be redundant.

Rachel WESTAWAY: But vulnerable people, I would put to you, need to be protected, and what we have been hearing throughout the course of submissions and hearings is that it is often the vulnerable that are preyed upon. When they are inside a cult it is all well and good for we on the outside who are strong individuals to say, 'Well, they've had an education program, so they're making an informed decision'. From what we are hearing they do not have capacity to make an informed decision, because they are vulnerable, they are being preyed upon, and therefore any education system in the world is not going to fix that, because they have been lured into something. And if that is your friend, your parent, your child, your sister or your brother, you would want some form of protection. So again I am asking you: is there any room for legislation in your mind?

Jasmine YUEN: No.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: John.

John LISTER: Thank you, and thank you, Jasmine and Reverend Duong, for coming along today. Today has been really insightful in talking about these things with different groups that are faith-based. I appreciate we have had a little bit of the history of Protestantism so far, with Martin Luther getting a call-out, and we have also had Constantine mentioned – and I am very impressed as a history teacher that we went down there. I do want to go to some of those principles that you referenced in that, but first I want to go to your submission and the development of it. How did you consult with your members ahead of preparing the submission? Was there some kind of process that you went through?

Jasmine YUEN: Yes, definitely. I reached out to a lot of pastors of different denominations. Definitely there is consensus that we do have concerns about new legislation, because we already see that some of the legislation in place is restricting how Christians can practise their faith and at some point could restrict how they could teach their faith as well. So we are concerned that if there is new legislation, it is not only tapping into Christian practices but Christian beliefs. The inquiry or the terms of reference or the guidelines say that the inquiry is looking into practices, but as I mentioned, practices and beliefs are inseparable.

John LISTER: That is an interesting thing that I do want to touch on in just a moment, but do you think the state has a role in protecting freedom of religion for people who are believers in different faiths? Does the state have a role in protecting that?

Jasmine YUEN: The government definitely have a role in protecting freedom of religion and different faith groups, but what we have been seeing is that instead of protecting freedom of religious conscience and expression, there are laws out there that Reverend Duong mentioned but did not name that have been restricting the teaching and the practice of our faith.

John LISTER: I did just want to go to some of the practices of faith. Reverend Duong, I will turn to you too as a senior pastor: have members of your organisation raised concerns about groups using faith to suck in or control people in those groups? You have referenced a few different groups in your submission, but have members raised concerns about this sort of practice being done – using faith to gain control of people?

Phi DUONG: Yes. Some of our pastors, in prayer meetings or in fellowship together – when we come together we share our faith or our ministry in the church – will say, ‘Oh, you know, we have some strange people who come to the church.’ They come to the church very politely, and then after this, those people can make some connections with the members of the church, the congregation. New people come to the church; when newcomers come to the church, I know, and then I ask them, ‘When new people approach you, what do they say to you or what do they talk to you about?’ They say, ‘Oh, he asked me to have a private appointment or meeting outside the church.’ I say, ‘What for?’ They say, ‘Probably to make a friendship or take a coffee and then have some Bible study.’ That is why you think, ‘What’s happened?’ Some pastors as well are concerned about this point, because the second time when they come, I ask them, ‘Where is your church? Where do you come from?’ They are very reluctant to answer my question. They probably come from nowhere – they just come to church to try to connect with some people, and they tack onto us, yes.

John LISTER: This is certainly an experience that has been shared today by a lot of the other faith groups and something that has been shared with me privately as well in my meeting different faith groups. How can faith groups call out groups or individuals who cross a line when it comes to using ‘faith’ to control people? How can faith groups call that out?

Phi DUONG: They will say they are not very same as us. Some people, they –

Jasmine YUEN: Can I answer that question?

John LISTER: Yes, of course.

Jasmine YUEN: How the pastor usually identifies that they are a cult is through their beliefs and doctrine. That makes it easy for the pastor to identify, because their beliefs and theology are all based on the Bible. As

soon as a cult member comes into recruit and lure them away for Bible study, for example, they will be able to differentiate that that is a different doctrine, theology and even Christology.

John LISTER: Yes. I appreciate that, and thank you. I want to turn to your submission very briefly. In point 11 you say that these groups that are having this effect in different faith groups, so individuals or groups going in to try and exert control, also impinge on those faith groups' right to freedom of religion. That is something that you have written here. Just to elaborate on that, do you think these fringe groups or individuals using 'faith' pose a risk to freedom of other people's religion and right to practice their faith?

Jasmine YUEN: Well, it could. Therefore there is no need for new legislation. The reason is that if there is new legislation controlling cults, it will tap into the religious freedom and faith groups. Therefore what we have been saying is that the current legislation is actually looking into criminal, abusive and even vilification, those kind of offences are enough to get them convicted of their abusive or cult behaviour.

John LISTER: Have we seen this happen with any of the groups that are infiltrating the religious faith groups that you represent? Have we seen any kind of behaviour or things that do cross that line, that do meet that test, to use existing laws against? Have we seen that?

Jasmine YUEN: I have not, but I have heard a lot from other pastors.

John LISTER: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Cindy.

Cindy McLEISH: Thank you, guys, for coming in and presenting today and for your earlier submission. I want to touch on something we have just been talking about. Jasmine, I think you mentioned about the criminal abuses and that there is already legislation in place. Through this inquiry we have heard of things that have been covered up by the churches: abuse of children, abuse of women, even some financial misuse. What needs to happen so that this does not get covered up? Because there are laws, you are right, but they are not getting enacted because too often people in and around cults are being really quiet about it, they are covering it up.

Jasmine YUEN: They just need to report it, because if there is –

Cindy McLEISH: But they are not. So how do we get them to report it?

Jasmine YUEN: Well, if they do not know how to report it with the existing law, even if you put in a new law, that will be the same. They will not be using the new law to report it.

Cindy McLEISH: They will just be avoiding it all, they will just continue the cover-ups.

Jasmine YUEN: Therefore education and prevention is best, because we help them to identify what a cult is and what is unbiblical in terms of the teaching of that institution. Then once they can acknowledge that they can identify it, they will be able to report that institution or that person, and then the police or any authority will be able to act on that based on the existing law.

Cindy McLEISH: Have you had examples, or do you know of examples, where that has happened?

Jasmine YUEN: No.

Cindy McLEISH: There have been some prosecutions here and there with different criminal matters. Just getting onto education and prevention, first of all, do you already run programs talking about abuse and coercive control for your members?

Jasmine YUEN: I do not work for a church. We are –

Cindy McLEISH: You have members of the Christian lobby.

Jasmine YUEN: Yes, but of course we will not be touching on this, because it is more the church's responsibility, I think. The church themselves actually need to help their congregation or individual members to identify what is coercive control or coercive behaviour and what is not biblical teaching so that when they are confronted by cults or cult members they know how to differentiate it. So the church actually needs to do a lot

of not only basic but advanced discipleship help to bring the congregation back to the basics of their theology, the Bible. If they are solid on their Bible knowledge, they will be able to identify what is biblical and what is not. Therefore they will be able to identify what is a cult and what is not.

Cindy McLEISH: We have heard some examples of where it is the leader – and again, I am not talking about a mainstream religion in any sense – who is perhaps charismatic, very manipulative, maybe even narcissistic, who is the one that is the problem, manipulating members of the congregation. How in those instances do you think we can educate people to understand? Because you were saying as well that people do not necessarily recognise that they are in a cult. How do we, in those instances where it is questionable, do the education piece?

Jasmine YUEN: Education will help, but perhaps education could go in general towards helping people to identify what coercive control is, because coercive control does not only happen in religious institutions. It could be happening in a secular institution as well. For example, lately there were reports from mainstream media that there is abusive behaviour within the CFMEU. Coercive control could also happen in political parties everywhere. So if this inquiry is looking into legislating against or controlling some of those coercive behaviours in faith-based institutions, I think it would be very dangerous because it will be, at the end, criminalising some of the people for their leadership style instead of for that institution being a cult. The danger is that it is difficult to differentiate whether it is leadership style or it is belief.

As I mentioned just now in the example that I gave, some of the scripture that Jesus said to follow him, deny yourself and follow him, take up the cross, could be interpreted as coercive control in a way if the preacher says that you must follow Jesus and commit to him to this extent. If someone in the congregation thinks that this is not something that they would like to do, but if that person interpreted it as something that is controlling, strong leadership, charismatic leadership that this person could not agree with, then that leader could get into trouble because of that misinterpretation.

Cindy McLEISH: I think some of the things we are hearing about coercive control say it is really, really harmful, and if a pastor or a minister is asking somebody to follow Jesus, that is not necessarily harmful at all.

Jasmine YUEN: Well, as I mentioned, it is not, but some people could interpret that it is. If there is really a toxic or abusive leadership, if they disagree with that, they can report to the higher authority of that church. But if that authority and those in leadership are not doing anything, they can easily report to any authority – the government or a secular authority – based on the current law. If that leader is really –

Cindy McLEISH: I think your problem is, Jasmine, that they do not. You said they do not realise they are in a cult, so they are not doing that. Because we heard earlier today that two-thirds of the referrals to one of the assistance areas come from family and friends, and people after they have left are the other third.

Jasmine YUEN: Yes. So does that mean that if the parents are abusive or coercive, it is also a cult – that family is a cult?

Cindy McLEISH: No, no, no, it was reporting that their child has been in a cult.

Jasmine YUEN: Yes, okay. What I mean is that if they are not going to report it, even with new legislation they are not going to report it, because they do not know that they are in a cult. So in the end, education and prevention will still be the best.

Cindy McLEISH: Okay. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Cindy. Jackson.

Jackson TAYLOR: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Jasmine and Reverend, for your time today, for coming in and for your responses. Just taking up some questioning from a number of colleagues, your submission suggests that existing laws provide adequate protection against coercive or abusive behaviours. Given that the committee has received several submissions and heard from witnesses that have observed that many alleged perpetrators go unprosecuted and that some behaviours may fall short of specific legislation – examples may include instances of psychological domination and identity suppression, restriction of movement

and association, information and surveillance control – which legal mechanisms do you believe are most effective in addressing these issues in a cult or high-control group context?

Jasmine YUEN: I still say education and prevention would be the best mechanism.

Jackson TAYLOR: Did you want to add anything, Reverend?

Phi DUONG: No, thanks.

Jackson TAYLOR: Thank you. You have noted your confidence in the current legal framework, but others, again, have suggested gaps remain, particularly in capturing patterns of coercion similar to those in family violence contexts. As discussed, some stakeholders have drawn parallels between coercive control in high-control groups and in family violence settings. These behaviours and family violence settings are addressed in legislation in New South Wales and Queensland. Just to assist:

... coercive control is a criminal offence in NSW when a person uses abusive behaviours towards a current or former intimate partner with the intention to coerce or control them.

The criminal offence captures repeated patterns of physical or non-physical abuse used to hurt, scare, intimidate, threaten or control someone.

Can I ask, do you have a particular view on that legislation? That is the New South Wales example.

Jasmine YUEN: Well, what I can foresee is that if there is new legislation coming in, whether it is similar to the New South Wales one or not, it could be a harm-based legislation, and we have seen a lot of harm-based legislation now which is very subjective. Not only is 'cult' hard to define, but 'harm' is very hard to define as well. So if you put in new laws to control or criminalise coercive control, 'harm-based' will be very dangerous, because, as I mentioned before, anyone can misinterpret anything according to their perception. What they perceive as harm or what they perceive as a cult might not be the case. Therefore I always say beliefs and practices are inseparable. If we do separate them, it will put the situation in a very complicated manner.

Jackson TAYLOR: Thank you for that answer. Based on that in-brief definition of the relevant offence in relation to intimate partner violence in New South Wales, can I just sort of understand how, if something like that was applied in a high-control group setting for coercive control, you would feel that might impinge on religious freedom?

Jasmine YUEN: I would question actually why high-control group – as I mentioned earlier, what about other organisations or institutions? Coercive control is not only happening in faith-based institutions, there are other secular institutions as well. If this inquiry leads to legislation that is only targeting the so-called high-control institutions, I would be very concerned about that. It would be really coming after the Christian churches or other faith-based groups.

Jackson TAYLOR: I think the Chair has made the terms of reference of this committee very clear, and the line of questioning is no different to the line of questioning we have had with previous witnesses today, but I do appreciate your response. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. And just to reiterate Jackson's comments there, there is no proposal to recommend legislation that specifically targets Christian churches or any other faith-based groups. That is absolutely not the intent of our inquiry. We have a very strict terms of reference and we need to make findings and recommendations that fit within the scope of our terms of reference.

Jasmine YUEN: I understand that, but at the same time, legislation – sorry, what I am trying to say is that even though it is not looking into controlling the faith-based institution, if there is any legislation that comes in, it will impact our faith communities.

The CHAIR: We are not at the point where we are making recommendations yet, but I will say we have had suggestions from other witnesses to consider legislation that considers coercive control because of the incredibly harmful impact it has on individuals and their families.

Jasmine YUEN: But how are practices and beliefs going to be defined and separated in having that definition? For example, financial coercion, some people could look at it as one of the cult behaviours. But at the same time, there are common practices among churches in that we are tithing. If people misinterpret tithing

as one of financial coercion, then the thing is how do you differentiate and how you are going to define what are cult practices and not interfere with common church practices?

The CHAIR: We had a fantastic conversation earlier today with representatives of Freedom for Faith, and tithing was one of the issues we spoke about. I would encourage you to read the transcript when it is published online. But in that conversation, we spoke about the key difference between a voluntary tithing, which is very common in many churches across Victoria and internationally, and compulsory tithing, and whether that shift from voluntary tithing to compulsory tithing is something that crosses the line into coercive control.

Jasmine YUEN: What about eschatology then, because there are a lot of people talking about fear-based teaching or end times. This could really tap into the eschatology, and it is biblical theology or Christian belief, so how do you differentiate? It is really hard, in my will, if you legislate fear-based teaching as one of the cultic practices. Even coercively controlling people is actually tapping into a theology and doctrine and biblical teaching. So my concern is how do you define it and not cross the line? Since it is so difficult, having new legislation is just very dangerous.

The CHAIR: Well, thank you. This is why we are having this conversation with you and with other representatives of faith-based organisations, because we think it is incredibly important that we hear all sides to this issue and continue to gather that evidence that will inform, as I mentioned earlier, balanced and practical recommendations. I will hand over to Annabelle now for her questions. Thanks, Annabelle.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Thank you. I do not really have many because you have been very thorough with your contribution. I guess just more for clarity and some feedback, just catching on one of your comments, Jasmine, around people, if they are in potentially religious cults, that they are so brainwashed, was your comment, I think. So if you are against legislation to protect vulnerable people, what is your suggestion to ensure that we are not coming for legitimate religious groups and instead those that are genuinely out there to harm vulnerable people and target vulnerable people? What is your guidance?

Jasmine YUEN: From what I see at the moment, most people that are coming in to testify are usually saying that this cult is coming from something similar to a Christian group, so this is one of the dangers. But what I suggest is that for people to understand what a cult is and what church practice is, I think it will come down to understanding the biblical teaching and the theology. Perhaps we can look into a group that teaches people about the Bible if they have concerns, if they are confused, so they can just come in and sit with us. Perhaps the ACL can think about establishing some groups that really help them to understand what the biblical teaching is and what cult practices are, how they are different, how they could be similar but how to differentiate it.

Another thing that I have been thinking about is that this inquiry seems to be focusing on a lot of Christian institutions, but what about other faith groups – for example, the Muslim groups? I am not saying that all Muslims are radical, but there are groups that are quite radical as well, jihadist groups that are recruiting members to commit jihad. So apart from looking into Christian institutions, would the committee look into these other faith groups as well?

Annabelle CLEELAND: We are only guided by our submissions. I think the Chair was probably wanting to respond to that comment. But on that, Jasmine, I imagine you have been looking at the submissions and following quite closely, so this is just a broad question: is there anything that you would like to contribute or to respond to from your perspective, because we really are inviting everyone to contribute to this inquiry.

Jasmine YUEN: Yes. At the moment a lot of people think that most of the common Christian practices are cult-like, but I just want to say that they are not. They could be and they might not be, because it really depends on subjective wills. I am not denying that some are really harmed by some of the cult institutions, but drawing in some of the common Christian practices or church practices and interpreting them as cult practice or teaching will be very dangerous. So it comes back to my initial concern: how does the committee, if there is new legislation, define what are cult practices and what Christian practices are not cult practices? This is something that is not easy to grapple with, because there are similarities and also differences, but it is a fine line. We just have to be very cautious. We want to protect people from harm, but at the same time, because it is so delicate, all these practices are so similar, we really have to be cautious not to drag mainstream churches and their

practices and teachings into it. At the end it will not only protect people from harm but also protect genuine Christian faith and churches.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Yes. Okay, I will give it back to the Chair. Thank you for your contribution.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Annabelle. John, you had one more question.

John LISTER: Yes, I just had a follow-up, and it kind of goes to the point you just made there, similar to what I was trying to get at. How do we protect mainstream religions and people who practise their faith in good conscience from these groups that are quite clearly doing harm? You have mentioned a couple here – Eastern Lightning and Shincheonji – which have come up quite often in this inquiry. One way that we have been talking today and throughout the inquiry is to set these legitimate churches and faith-based groups apart from those other groups. One of the ways that that could potentially happen is by having guidelines for ministry. So should churches and Christian organisations have guidelines for their ministry?

Jasmine YUEN: I think they already have guidelines in all different kinds of ministry. It depends on which area you are talking about. So if you are talking about helping their congregation to identify all these cults and their teaching, as I mentioned before, it would be best for the church and church leaders to teach them the Bible. And for the wider community, they also need to know, because I heard that some of the cult members are actually recruiting at unis or different public places, so perhaps we can have some form of education at school. But I do not recommend having it too extensively as I see there are too many non-academic programs already in place that are taking away time for literacy and numeracy. But we are able to help them to identify what coercive control is so that they can protect themselves in general, not only from certain cults or faith-based groups. What it means is that, let us say when they get in touch or when they are involved in certain secular institutions, let us say a sport club or whatever that is, or when they are in a workplace or even in a union – CFMEU, for example – they will be able to identify what abusive behaviours are, and it will help them to report, help them to protect themselves from it.

John LISTER: And so in that case, how then do we have this same accountability for groups that may not have these guidelines for ministry? How do we make sure that they have practices? Because there are some groups that are on the fringe, and we are not here to judge what their beliefs are, but how can the state ensure that they have guidelines like that, and their guidelines show what their ministry should be and what it should look like? How can we ensure that?

Jasmine YUEN: Yes. All the mainstream churches will have accountability already. I think most of them will be under the ACNC. So –

John LISTER: So should the ACNC be making sure that people who are registered as a charity have some form of guideline for ministry to make sure that they are not necessarily exploiting that status as a religious group, the tax-free status?

Jasmine YUEN: They do have some guidelines at the moment, but I need to look into it. But extra guidelines could be put into it in order not to interfere with their religious freedom as well. But I do want to flag that if there is a true cult, it really needs to be called out. If that cult is really causing harm, we do want to call that out and prevent future harms. That is very clear in our submission.

John LISTER: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you to Jasmine and Reverend Duong for appearing on behalf of the Australian Christian Lobby before the committee today. We appreciate your time and effort taken to prepare your evidence and your submission. You will be provided with a proof version of today's transcript to check, and verified transcripts will be published on the committee's website. Thank you again.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Committee adjourned.