
QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Prepared by Clare Heath-McIvor for the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Cults and Fringe Groups (hearing date October 13th)

- 1. There are cults that have been receiving government funding but were not necessarily specific about what cults they were and what funding they received. Could you guide us with some of that information if possible?**

My opening statement before the inquiry referred to the Rapid Relief Team, which is linked to the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (PBCC), and to City Builders Church, and drew on information from the Australian Charities and Not-for-Profit Commission (ACNC). These were examples as to how government may fund community groups in good faith, with no knowledge of their cult affiliation or dynamics, or fund fringe religious for community activities. Intelligence gathering is likely needed to link these groups with their associated charities or incorporated bodies through which grants may be administered as these structures or related initiatives may be purposefully opaque.

For the sake of example, the Rapid Relief Team received \$459,859 in government revenue, including grants in the 2022/2023 financial year, and \$128,655 in the 2023/24 financial year. In the 2021/22 financial year, this amount was \$584,410. Without knowing that this group was related to the PBCC, this significant government revenue would not be linked to cults. In the 2019/20 financial year, City Builders Church received \$25,655 in government revenue including grants, and \$49,600 the following year. Kingsway Christian Centre (a small ISAAC network church and 'covenant partner' of City Builders Church, though the entities remain distinct) received \$10,000 in 2019/20, 2020/21.

Using a rudimentary search of ACNC data, I was able to extract over three hundred grants to look through. A quick glance and a quick web search left me with six groups with cultic allegations and two further organisations with questionable status. As there was more than one school that turned up in this search, this amounted to more than \$18 million in grants.

A number of cult, high-control or fringe organisations that use the legitimacy shield of "basic charity status" and do not report. They are able to stay out of reporting requirements if they answer six criteria correctly (at least on paper), and receive less than \$100,000 per annum in government grants. For small, potentially fringe groups operating under a front of "small community" groups (religious or otherwise), this low bar may easily be cleared.

Other groups flagged as fringe or cultic, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, do not report to the ACNC as individual congregations, but rather as national or international collectives. This makes their grant status hard for the layman to track.

In short, this is a difficult question to answer as a concrete and exhaustive list of cults does not exist. While it is responsible for government to obtain research and intelligence into this issue to avoid funding access by cults to vulnerable people, thus funding and legitimising cult activity, my advice is to proceed with care and not make this list public. Any publicly held list of cultic groups, while held with the intent of monitoring behaviour, may cross over into a public critique of beliefs rather than behaviours.

Beyond Belief proposes a tiered response. Legislative reform is necessary. However, research, education (including public education), and resources for survivor exit and recovery should be the priority. When a group escalates in terms of harm and public risk, *then* civil compliance notices, public health warnings or criminal recourse should be used to ensure public safety.

- 2. I have been asking this of everyone who has presented and supported the inquiry around understanding where potentially law might be protecting these cults with the transparent reporting of finances. If you have got any further information regarding how it could be perceived where there is a protection on some of these groups because of not-for-profit or charity status, that would be really important.**

Cults and financial transparency will remain a difficult issue to police. Cults commonly hold a 'transcendent' belief system, which allows them to believe they operate on a higher level than the legal system. They may believe the government is out to get them, or that they must hide their activities from outsiders. This makes financial disclosure a difficult issue to regulate, monitor and police. Sadly, the anti-cult or cult survivor space is yet to produce a forensic accountant (that I know of), and this is likely required to help solve this problem.

Cults may also be unregistered and operate on a cash-only basis (like the Truth 2x's), or purposefully misreport their finances. It is common practice to pass the proverbial hat around these groups, gaining cash donations to run operations. This amount is likely to be unreported.

No organisation is going to self-identify as a cult. Some may appear to be legitimate businesses, but may be engaging in unethical business practices despite appearing legitimate on paper. They may engage in wage theft, labour exploitation and financial exploitation while appearing legitimate on paper. Cult members may donate significant amounts to cult leaders who then do not declare this amount as earnings, but rather as a gift that goes untaxed.

Wider intelligence gathering is required, but dark money in cults is likely to remain dark.

- 3. What recommendations do you believe would have the greatest immediate impact for survivors, and are there barriers to implementation?**

To the former, I endorse the recommendations section of the Beyond Belief Whitepaper. While these are spelled out in detail, they broadly include: lived experience leadership, recognition and research, supports for exits and recovery, multi-agency coordination, and legal and regulatory reform (group-based coercive control).

Embedding survivor-led expertise and co-design at every level is vital, as it is only through this that the nuance can be captured. Beyond Belief mapped out thirty areas of law and twenty-one different departments that may hold a sliver of the cult and high-control group problem within their remit. It also mapped out 205 coercive behaviours that may be only covered partially, if at all. When placed in the group-based coercive control context of patterned, cumulative harm across multiple domains of life, we can begin to see how this amounts to totalistic control.

But the silos mean that this issue requires an independent commissioner to coordinate responses, undertake research, and oversee legislation in this area. It is my hope that this inquiry has shown the pervasive nature of group-based coercive control as it occurs in cults and high-control groups. It is also my hope that we are now seeing that this is not so much a fringe issue, but an issue of healthy vs toxic community anywhere groups exist. The data gleaned from the questionnaire was compelling, as have been the stories of how group dynamics in cults and high-control groups have been used to cover up said abuse.

To this end, the greatest barriers to implementations are as follows:

- *The false flag of religious freedom.* While the government must take care to separate behaviours from belief (hence my warning about publicly held cult lists), the data pertaining to harms suffered in cults is egregious and beyond the pale of what is acceptable. While freedom of religion is sacred and should remain, vulnerable people within cults and high-control groups need and deserve protection. By legislating against group-based coercive control, we can separate these issues. But survivor expertise and co-design are necessary.
- *The false flag that child abuse is more important than abuse that occurs over the age of eighteen.* Child abuse is egregious. It is vital that government understand it and stop it. The death of Elizabeth Struhs was a warning flag that should point to the levels of medical, educational, and other forms of neglect that occur in cults alongside sexual and physical abuse. Children in these closed systems do not have protective adults around them who can raise alarms or adequately protect them. Thus, a protective approach needs to be intelligent and nuanced.

However, these children grow up to be adults who suffer from developmental trauma, pass on normalised abuse and neglect, and it may take generations to extract them from these cults.

Furthermore, indoctrination and recruitment into cults is a process of gradual, systemic loss of agency resulting in an entrapment situation that is extraordinarily difficult to escape. There can be no genuine consent here, as the recruit may have only consented to go to a social gathering, and then a self-help course (for the sake of example). They did not realise they were being groomed into a cult. By the time their entire lives, social circles, reputations, families, and even living situations, employment, and finances are invested in these groups, genuine free will consent is not possible.

For women, leaving a cult may also mean leaving a domestic abuse situation, and seeking help for this within the cult may mean being forced to return and being put in a place of elevated risk. Current approaches to foster care hold reunification as the ultimate goal in most cases, so removing cult kids from their parents' care is unlikely to save them from cult

influence in the long run. I have knowledge of situations in which cults or high-control group members or leaders have fostered or even adopted children *into* these systems. Frail and aged people, as well as those on disability benefits, may also be targeted by cults. Anti-cult protections must be across all ages, otherwise we cannot adequately protect children, even though they may suffer severe and ongoing harm.

- *Silos in law and practice.* Survivors are faced with an overwhelmingly difficult task when they leave. Silos in law and practice may mean that the police, family violence services, childcare, therapeutic interventions, family court, criminal court, and a vast number of other departments and services aren't talking to each other. This leaves the cult survivor to have to become their own case manager, and requires them to repeat their story over and over. During this time, their experiences may be dismissed, minimised, or used against them. An independent commissioner is needed to educate, research and coordinate organisations and departments to form a sustainable and systemic solution.

Thank you for the opportunity to answer these questions on notice. I am available to assist the committee with further advice, recommendations or consultations.