

T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups

Melbourne – Monday 13 October 2025

MEMBERS

Ella George – Chair

Annabelle Cleeland – Deputy Chair

Chris Couzens

John Lister

Cindy McLeish

Jackson Taylor

Rachel Westaway

WITNESS

Laura McConnell.

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

I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues participating here today: Annabelle Cleeland, Member for Euroa and Deputy Chair; Cindy McLeish, Member for Eildon; Christine Couzens, Member for Geelong; John Lister, Member for Werribee; and Rachel Westaway, Member for Prahran. Jackson Taylor, the Member for Bayswater, is an apology for today's meeting.

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

Today the committee is holding its second day of hearings for this inquiry, where the committee continues to gather evidence from witnesses with lived experience. I ask that witnesses keep the terms of reference in mind when providing evidence.

This inquiry is not about judging or questioning anyone's beliefs. What we are focused on is the behaviour of cults and high-control groups that use coercive techniques to recruit and control their members and the impacts of these behaviours. On behalf of the committee, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have engaged in 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 Laura McConnell. Thank you, Laura, for your time and interest in participating in this important inquiry. We recognise the significance of you coming here today to share your lived experience and acknowledge that sharing your experience and trauma may be emotional.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. 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 hear from Laura, who has been asked to make a brief opening statement in public before taking questions in a private session. Laura, I will hand over to you to make your opening statement. Thank you.

Laura McCONNELL: I want to thank this committee for having me here today and for undertaking this serious and difficult piece of work hearing the experiences of people who have been impacted by cults in Victoria. My name is obviously Laura McConnell. I was born and raised in a secretive group which claims to have no name and no earthly registrations. It is known as the Truth, the Two by Twos, the Way, the fellowship and the friends of workers. They are a home-based fundamentalist Christian group.

I was raised inside this group, fifth generation on my maternal side and third generation on my paternal side. It is my understanding that both sides of my family were recruited in times of poverty, distress and disenfranchisement in rural areas.

I will refer to the group as the Two by Twos or the Truth Two by Twos to reflect the ways they are known across the world. Due to the lack of formal structures and registrations, it is impossible to give you accurate numbers of followers in Victoria, Australia or worldwide. They are a worldwide group with the largest followings in the US and Canada followed then by Australia and New Zealand. In the mid-1990s there were believed to be up to 15,000 followers in Australia. I now believe there are around 2500, with around a third of those in Victoria. In Victoria there are yearly conventions held on family farms in Speed near Ouyen, Colac, Drouin and Thoona near Benalla. I believe the current leader of the Truth Two by Twos in Victoria to be Malcolm Clapham and the leader of New South Wales, who is usually considered to be the leader of Australia, to be Graeme Dalton.

I was excommunicated and shunned out when I was 19 years old in 1999. The group claims not to excommunicate or to shun. Instead, what they do is very slowly through social exclusion and social isolation push you out if you do not adhere to the group's unwritten rules and standards. This includes strict standards of appearance and conservative gender and sexuality expectations. It involves active participation in Two by Twos rituals from an early age and an expectation that, from around the age of 12, you will have formally committed to the group in an act called professing. There is an expectation that you will marry within the group and that your home and your work and your family will be set up in a way which adheres to group Two by Twos' norms and expectations.

I was a queer kid who did not want to get married and have children, which was expected of me. I wanted to get an education and a career, and I pushed back on gendered norms and behaviours and I was pushed out for that. I then spent periods of time living in poverty and experiencing housing stress.

The levels of dysfunction in my family and community as a result of the beliefs of the Two by Twos mean that I have experienced very little support since my leaving and experienced significant backlash for speaking publicly and supporting others. I grew up in rural, regional and remote communities, including on the Victoria–New South Wales border near Swan Hill. I grew up surrounded by family violence, CSA, grooming, physical and verbal abuse, and spiritual and religious abuse. I have CPTSD and I live with chronic pain.

I have acted as a survivor advocate for the past 26 years, supporting others inside and from the group, many of whom live with CPTSD and chronic health conditions. Until the past decade I did this work quietly and under a pseudonym because I did not feel safe enough to do this advocacy under my own name until my grandparents' generation had passed away. And when I speak to some of the backlash, you will understand that I was justified in that fear. I was very afraid for my grandparents' generation that they would be shunned and excommunicated if it was known that I was supporting people and advocating for others and trying to report some of the abuse to the authorities.

I recently found a letter that my grandmother wrote to me after she discovered that I had helped a woman from our community access support. In that letter she tells me I need to stop helping people and not get involved in these things because some of the congregation will not speak to her after hearing that her granddaughter has supported other people and caused trouble for them. I was very scared of my family being treated the way that I was, and I live with a very deep shame and sadness that much of my community do not support my advocacy and that I am framed as a troublemaker and a traitor to my community. That is not an easy thing to live with, knowing that I bring deep shame for speaking out about our culture and its abusive behaviours.

The violence and abuse does not stop even after you leave a group like the Two by Twos. I have been sent threatening and intimidatory letters and emails. I have had my car tyres let down; I have had my car wheel nuts loosened. I have experienced family members threatening suicide because I speak out about the Two by Twos. My employers have been contacted to complain about me. I have been falsely accused, I have been doxxed, I have had rumours spread about me in smear campaigns. I have had threats to harm my child and my pet and threats to burn my house down. I have been followed and had paraphernalia left in my letterbox after appearing as a witness in court cases.

Much of the backlash, I believe, has been about narrative control and trying to control other Two by Twos asking questions and potentially leaving. I have been threatened with defamation for speaking out. I live with very real threats and intimidation as a result of my advocacy for cult survivors. I obviously live with hypervigilance and have to implement high levels of security around me out of fear for my physical safety. I have predominantly supported women, LGBTQIA+ and young people and usually they have experienced combinations of CSA, SA, family violence and gender-based violence and controls such as limited access to contraception, endogamy and coerced marriage.

Undoubtedly the hardest part of my advocacy has been supporting young LGBTQIA+ people who remind me of 19-year-old Laura. I interact with and support kids who have been kicked out of homes and communities for disclosing that they are gay or dressing and behaving in ways which may indicate that they are. Watching young people experience that isolation and shame is heartbreaking for me. The next hardest thing is sitting with young people who cannot yet articulate that they have experienced sexual abuse. They cannot use words like 'rape' or 'assault' because they have been taught those things do not happen in communities like ours, that our communities are the only safe place and that those kinds of abuses only happen in the world. I have sat beside

young people who have refused rape kits in hospital despite demonstrating very obvious signs and signals that this has occurred, because they do not believe that that kind of thing would happen in our communities. That would only happen in the world.

The group in my experience and opinion has endemic levels of CSA, family violence, financial control and coercion. There are strict gender roles, strict appearance standards and controls on interactions with people outside the group. Followers have historically been discouraged from reporting abusers to police and from talking to outsiders like psychologists, counsellors, doctors and other investigators.

Our clergy are called 'workers' and they live itinerantly in the homes of parishioners. The levels of control and surveillance that this practice enables is harmful. Workers will claim they no longer discourage people from reporting to worldly authorities, which is inaccurate. I have stories of this behaviour still taking place, of the shuffling of abusers to other countries before legal action can take place and stories of workers funding the legal defence of abusers while shunning survivors. In my own life, over a key 10-year period in my childhood, 75 per cent of the workers or clergy who came into my community now have allegations of abuse against them. Fifty per cent of them abused me. I recall being sexualised and expected to protect myself from predators from around the age of eight years old. I experienced abuses and cover-ups from both men and women in the Two by Twos community.

Two by Twos refuse to register church entities or corporate entities and implement legally binding accountability structures anywhere in the world. They operate in cash donations and then, in my experience, siphon the money through wealthy Truth Two by Twos legitimate businesses. They also utilise family trusts, with wealthy and trusted families rather than clergy listed as the trustees. In Australia that has resulted in survivors like me being unable to access redress through the federal redress scheme set up after the royal commission into institutional child abuse. Two by Twos are not a legal entity and there is no way to pursue them for redress. It makes taking legal action, either criminal or civil, against leaders of the group very difficult as there are no formal leadership, employee or volunteer records. All funds are seemingly hidden in family trusts and family businesses, which the workers are not listed as directors or trustees of. I have personally spent the better part of the last decade submitting to the royal commission, encouraging others to submit, naming the group and trying to access redress. This has resulted in no outcome for Two by Twos survivors and has been an extremely distressing experience. None of our claims has been able to progress through that scheme to date.

Two by Twos are predominantly an oral tradition, with very little ideology written down or published in formal documents. They use plausible deniability to avoid accountability. Two by Twos are tight communities, and obtaining information to pursue legal proceedings can also be difficult for shunned survivors like me. I have tried to take legal action against abusers in the Two by Twos community with no success to date.

I wanted all of this information on the public record to give space and validation to the experiences of many Truth Two by Twos survivors in Victoria. The secretive nature of this group has allowed them to stay hidden and allowed them to shame many survivors into silence for decades with very little support. I am acutely aware that in sitting here today representing survivors of the Truth Two by Twos and speaking to this parliamentary committee I am doing something powerful and historic, and I hope that in naming this group here today and sharing some of our experiences we can reclaim some power and return some shame to where it belongs – onto Truth Two by Twos elders, workers and overseers who have shamed us and silenced us. It is my hope that in speaking more widely, both here and in my advocacy, I can be part of a change in the way cult survivors are supported and that some research into our experiences can be undertaken and support services upskilled to support us – and ultimately that the shame that many of us feel can be removed.

At present support services and agencies are quite siloed and not well briefed in identifying or supporting people from cult environments. I regularly support people dealing with agencies who are not able to adequately support the complexities of cult experiences – and that is not a reflection on those agencies, who do try very hard. They are not set up, funded or structured in a way that makes supporting a cult survivor easy. This further compounds survivors' CPTSD and creates an institutional trauma and a distrust.

Many of us have intergenerational trauma. Most Two by Twos survivors I know are multigenerational. We do not have a support structure outside of the group and have been taught to mistrust the world outside. This trauma is further compounded when cult experiences intersect with other marginalisations with survivors who are black, brown, LGBTIQ+, rural, regional and remote, low SES and disabled. This further compounds the

isolation and the harm, both inside and upon leaving. The vast majority of us have experienced marginalisation, economic impacts and health impacts and get very little funded support. We live with trauma, shame and stigma, and those things have happened not just from our experiences inside cults but also from the ways we are treated when we leave. Leaving is also a traumatic and difficult experience.

Having said all of those things, this is the most hopeful I have felt in 26 years that it is possible to get some change for cult survivors. For the first time since I left the Truth Two by Twos, I am experiencing a sense of being believed, of being heard and of not being alone in wanting to get change for cult survivors in this state and in this country. There is a sense in our community more widely that coercion in relationships is not acceptable. That same coercion has been occurring in group settings, and the community, I believe, increasingly feels uncomfortable with that behaviour in a group setting.

I believe that our Victorian community wants coercive group behaviour addressed so that groups of all kinds can be safe and inclusive for all communities. In my opinion, group-based coercive behaviour, as outlined in the white paper submission *Beyond Belief*, which I endorsed, requires deep examination so that group-based coercive behaviour can be addressed. The data you recently released is in itself groundbreaking and powerful for agencies, for the broader community and for survivor advocates. That simple data that was released from the online survey, which I suspect maybe you think is just a small thing, is the first time I have seen government-collated data on cult survivors in Australia. That small amount of data is powerful, and any data that you can continue to provide is welcome – to validate our experiences and to use as evidence about the harms we have experienced.

I am more hopeful than I have ever been that when a queer young person, like I was, walks out of the Two by Twos, something safe and inclusive will be on the other side to catch them. I am more hopeful than ever that our stories will be used for more than trauma porn. It was until very recently difficult to find outlets who would publish cult survivor stories without voyeurism and as entertainment. If I could go back a year and tell myself that this inquiry was happening, I do not think I could believe it. I have found this advocacy very difficult, and it has in the past burnt me out, retraumatised me and left me feeling hopeless. Thank you for reigniting that hope in me that we can get data on survivors, that we can get research undertaken, that we can get agencies educated and briefed on what group coercive behaviour is and that we can get cult trauma-informed media reporting. I do not think I could have believed that.

Thank you again to this committee and also to the secretariat staff who sit around you because I want to acknowledge that you will all have been exposed to cult survivor stories, which will have caused extreme distress in the past few months. Thank you for graciously hearing our stories and working with us to create change for cult survivors.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Laura. The committee appreciates your statement. On behalf of the committee, I do just want to say thank you so much for sharing your experiences with us and thank you for your advocacy for other cult survivors. It sounds like you have supported hundreds of people over the years with all the work that you have done and changed many people's lives, so thank you for all that work.

We will now move into a private session to allow for the remainder of the evidence to be taken confidentially. I ask that the live broadcast now be turned off.

In camera evidence follows.

WITNESS

Laura McConnell.

The CHAIR: We will now continue with our private session with Laura McConnell. Laura, committee members will now ask some questions of you. If at any stage you would like to take these questions on notice, please just let us know.

Firstly, I would like to ask you some questions about recruitment. Can you talk us through how the Truth Two by Twos recruited new members, including members who were not born into the group?

Laura McCONNELL: There are very few people, in my experience, who are not born into the group anymore. They have really doubled down on maintaining existing members. Because the group has very high levels of marrying within the group, it is very difficult often to find a spouse and so there is some recruitment happening through marrying into other groups in the community like the PBCC or the Plymouth Brethren, and like other very right-wing conservative Christian groups they might selectively allow some marriages and some conversions to happen. They do have gospel meetings in halls where they will say that that is their way of attracting new members, and they will also claim that is why they are not secretive. Often in my work they will say, 'We're not secretive because we have these gospel meetings.' They have gospel meetings in towns across the country. In Victoria usually there is, I would say, 10 or 15 of them happening at any one time, but in my experience very, very few people ever really attended to convert. Most conversions now are happening through marriage outside the group.

The CHAIR: Okay. Have you noticed any particular vulnerabilities such as age, life stage or personal circumstances that are targeted during recruitment?

Laura McCONNELL: I should say they were very big on recruiting from around the 1930s through to the mid-1990s, so there were very much recruitment programs happening, and they would very much target people in working class, low SES – people with vulnerabilities. Even now they do sometimes go into prisons. With a few people having been found guilty of various offences in the group in the last decade or so, they will go into prisons and they will visit those offenders in prison and while they are in prison they are also subtly recruiting others in that prison system, which is problematic on various levels. They tended to target people who are lonely, in the past, people who are seeking connection. In my own family they have sought out people who were experiencing things like bankruptcy, mental health issues, death of a child – so periods of your life where you are feeling vulnerable essentially.

The CHAIR: Okay. Just one more question on recruitment. Did you ever see any warning signs or patterns in recruitment that you think authorities or communities could have recognised earlier?

Laura McCONNELL: For me, if I watch now the kinds of people I see being married into the group, I feel that those people are not marrying in with a full understanding of who they are marrying into. The pattern I see is just a lack of understanding about the group that they are marrying into. When there is no formal name, when there are no formal registrations, there is no information on this group, people are not realising what they are marrying into or what they are being recruited into. Even when they put their notices out for papers – they will put a notice sometimes in the paper or they will hand out little flyers in people's mailboxes, which by the way do not work – they are not even saying who they are. There is just this hiding of their information. Even recently online I had someone look at one of the flyers and say, 'But what's wrong with that flyer?' People just do not understand that they do not have a name, they do not have registrations. Teaching people to ask critical questions just seems to be so important because people do not know what they are getting involved in.

The CHAIR: Thanks. I will hand over to Annabelle for some questions.

Annabelle CLEELAND: This is probably following on from those comments – and, Laura, you are just so brave, and we are so grateful for your time and your courage as well – we are looking at it from the Victorian government opportunity and legislation to try and fix some of the stuff that you have shared with us. You mentioned how you have gone through the courts and it has not resulted in a conviction, and the lack of legal accountability and the challenges in this space. Talk me through how they are able to do that, and is there any

opportunity from a legal, financial or Victorian government perspective that we can investigate to prevent that from happening in the future?

Laura McCONNELL: Yes, it is very hard when the group does not have a formal registration of any description in its own name or any paperwork even describing who the leader is and what the leader's role is. There is no written theological information at all – there is just none. They do not write down their theology at all. Everything is spoken verbally. To go to court – in the couple of instances that I have had it is very difficult to prove when you have no evidence whatsoever that somebody was in your community, was in your home, was running the services in your community if there is just no paperwork. I have nothing. There are photos, for instance, but even getting access to those photos I found very hard because my community is so closed; they just would not provide any of those photos to me to demonstrate that that person had been in my community at that time period. So for me to take legal action has been basically impossible, although I do have one case still open.

For me, I feel that there is an opportunity to write legislation or to craft legislation in a way that says if someone would expect that you are the leader of an organisation – even if that organisation does not exist, if you are purporting to be that leader, if you are acting as a leader – regardless of whether the paperwork exists and regardless of whether the legal structures exist, you are in fact the leader of an organisation or a group. At the moment if there is nothing anywhere written down or recorded that says, 'This person is our leader' or 'This is the group', how do you prove that in a court of law if you have literally nothing to give to a prosecutor?

Annabelle CLEELAND: So what is the law that you are trying to use to convict some of these –

Laura McCONNELL: Even with something like a childhood sexual assault I cannot prove that that man was in my community at that point in time.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Because they have not got a birth certificate or –

Laura McCONNELL: If he is a homeless preacher who moves between communities and he abuses me in one community and then moves on to another community, how do I prove he was ever in my community?

Annabelle CLEELAND: Wow. Financially, it sounds like there is a money trail, but how –

Laura McCONNELL: There is no money trail, because people are handing over wads of cash to each other after meetings and after events, and those wads of cash will go to a leader and then he takes it and it is not really clear what happens to it, although it is fairly obvious there are some wealthy families that are taking that cash and filtering it through their family businesses and family trusts. But the workers, or the people in charge, are never listed as trustees, as directors, as anything. There is actually no concrete link between our clergy and the money at all. The money is all held in family names, in my opinion.

Annabelle CLEELAND: So your recommendation is a code of conduct of the seniorities within the group?

Laura McCONNELL: Or a registration – that you need to actually be registered. If you are going to operate as church or as a group there needs to be some kind of registration process where you need to have a registered church entity, a group entity, with a leadership structure and an accountability structure, because at the moment it is just all cash, and there are no documents at all. There is no leadership structure, there are no volunteer records, there are no clergy records – nothing. Nothing exists.

Annabelle CLEELAND: I have more, but I will share with my colleagues, if that is okay.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Christine.

Chris COUZENS: Thanks, Laura, so much for your submission and for coming today but also for helping others out there in the community who are experiencing similar trauma. I know how difficult it is for you to be here today, but thanks for your courage and commitment to be here. It is amazing. Thank you. You made a number of recommendations in your submission and you mentioned some today. I was really interested to draw out a bit around the awareness and education piece and what you see as being the key components of that. You do not have to answer now, but if you want to.

Laura McCONNELL: No, I am happy to. For me, I just see that there are opportunities across the whole broad range of areas for education, and that is from schools right through to hospitals, doctors, psychologists, counselling and frontline agencies, because at every touchpoint there seem to be opportunities where conversations can be had and where questions can be asked and support can be given that really just get overlooked and missed. I think there is a lot of fear about asking too many questions. The community I come from is very secretive; we are taught not to tell anyone anything. So teachers, doctors, whatever – I think they will try to ask little questions, and when they are teasing and nothing is coming out they do not really know where to go with it.

So it is about, for me, upskilling wherever we can, whether that is teachers, nurses, doctors, psychologists, counsellors, frontline housing services – how to ask teasing questions and how, when you are getting roadblocked, what you can do with that; to ask about beliefs; to ask about what other things might be underpinning behaviour; and also, red flags in terms of what language is used. You know, a lot of high-control groups – and to be fair, I have not just dealt with Two by Two survivors in the past 26 years. I have dealt with Jehovah's Witness survivors, I have dealt with PBCC survivors and Open Brethren survivors and there are similarities there in that the language is very exclusive. It is a very 'us and them, world against us' language. So there are just so many opportunities to educate front line, whatever that service looks like, about how to read that language, how to read that behaviour, how to ask more questions and then what to do with that information.

At the moment, even if you have somebody who can tease out what is happening behind the scenes, what do they then do with it? What services then can you be kind of encouraged to go down? Often I have found that young people will test over and over again: Can I trust this teacher? Can I trust this doctor? The times that they do come into contact with people, nurses, whatever, and they will very quickly test and learn that there is nothing. Like, they might get a good response, but there is no support after that. So it is providing that front line with not only how to test but also what support I can help this person get safely. How can I help this person feel they can trust and that there is something on the other side? And that something does not always need to be legal action. It can be 'here's a housing support service that, when you're ready, will understand where you're at', 'here's a domestic violence service that, when you are ready to talk about this or do something, you can go there'. So it is just layers and layers of yes, a whole, like, wraparound.

Chris COUZENS: Yes. So would you say specific training for those educators, the people that are out there potentially supporting people?

Laura McCONNELL: Yes, correct.

Chris COUZENS: Like teachers or community service workers, youth workers, all of that – a specific course or a component of an existing course that would educate?

Laura McCONNELL: Yes, I almost see concentric circles. Like, there would be something for education, whether it is primary or secondary. Because recruitment comes into this too, you know. Thinking bigger than the Two by Twos, if you could actually put in place training at a primary and secondary level that helps kids understand what coercive group behaviour is and also stops that recruitment process and pipeline of other groups as well.

And then there is the housing piece. Like, what does housing need to look like for somebody who is thinking about leaving? What do services for queer kids look like? So it is, like, training that can be contextualised for different areas and has different touchpoints – just even simple things like the language that you might hear, like the kinds of presentations you might see, what a cult survivor might look like or might not look like. Because there is a lot of stigma. People have very preconceived ideas about what a cult survivor looks like, and most of us look nothing like that. So it is, like, this training and education about what is a cult, what is a cult survivor, what are examples of coercive behaviour, and obviously that needs to be contextualised based on your age and your demographic.

Chris COUZENS: Of the recommendations you have made, what would you see as being the most important piece? Would it be education awareness or the counselling or any of those things?

Laura McCONNELL: I think there are probably two for me. It is stemming the bleeding right now. It is, like, there is nothing for anyone who walks out other than cult-survivor advocates right now. And I think we are

all wonderful people, and we are all trying very, very hard. But, you know, like, we should not be stemming the bleeding of this. There should be services there. That obvious very first step right now is an issue. But also then there is the whole bigger piece about how to stop this happening more widely, right, and the education so that people do not get into this stuff to begin with. So it is: it is the education, and it is also the right here and now.

Chris COUZENS: Yes. You have mentioned a bit of that in your submission. You have done a lot of work with survivors, over many years obviously. When considering the survivors you have worked with, what patterns of harm do you consistently see?

Laura McCONNELL: The mental health issues are just the first glaring big ones. Pretty much every single one of the ones I have come into contact with has CPTSD – deeply traumatised people who have not gotten the levels of support that they need on the other side. The issues with health and health impacts are just – none of us have no health impacts; there are just people with chronic health issues everywhere. It is then going on to other deeply controlling and coercive relationships. For me, the layers of abuse that are still continuing even outside that cult environment are problematic. We have no other template for how to live, and there is just so much expectation of coercive and abusive behaviour that we think it is normal to live with abuse.

Chris COUZENS: Do you think that lack of support for survivors – in saying your experience, you have obviously done a lot of work with different people. Do you see that as forcing them back into that bad environment? I mean, obviously it is having a massive impact on them when they are leaving and have made the decision to leave; there are no supports apart from what people like you are providing. Is that pushing them back?

Laura McCONNELL: It does go back, yes. It sort of depends – I see a lot of men return. It is so interesting. I see a lot of men return, and women do not. For women, I think there is so much – by the time they have gotten to the point where they are going to leave, there is actually no way most of them are going back. Men in the group get given so much power, and there is so much more for a man to go back for than there is for a woman. I often find men really, really struggle outside the group, because they have been raised in this ideology that they are going to get given power and they are going to get this position and that there are things for them in that group.

Chris COUZENS: Yes.

Laura McCONNELL: I have multiple experiences in my own life of men going back. Women, once they have decided they are going, they are not going back, or they are much, much less likely to go back. But yes, I think a lot of the intimidation is about silencing them and making them so afraid of the world outside that they will go back. The other part is making sure that it is very, very clear to people still in the group that if you leave, it is not going to be nice for you out there. So they almost revel in your failure outside; they revel in the fact that you are now in a terrible domestic violence situation with an outsider, and they revel in that and they talk about it, because it means that other people are too scared to leave. Genuinely, I think all of us are so primed to living with abuse that we do not even recognise it is happening most of the time. That is the reality.

Chris COUZENS: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Cindy.

Cindy McLEISH: Thank you, and I really admire your frankness and how you are speaking to us and the courage that it takes to do so, and you are doing brilliantly.

Laura McCONNELL: Thank you.

Cindy McLEISH: Just a couple of really quick ones to start with: did you have siblings?

Laura McCONNELL: I do, yes.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Cindy McLEISH: And what about schooling?

Laura McCONNELL: Yes. I come from a rural and regional area where I did go to public schools, and many, many of us do go to public schools, but we are taught to keep ourselves separate from the world, essentially; we are discouraged from having friendships with the kids around us, from participating in sport or music or drama or any of those things. So we do get mostly a public school education. When I was growing up, mostly that was cut short at about year 9 or year 10; now they will stay in school a little longer, but we are discouraged really from doing – especially us girls – anything with our education at all.

Cindy McLEISH: So you would not have had an opportunity to have many friends except for the friends who may be your age from the Two by Twos?

Laura McCONNELL: Correct, yes. I was very, very lucky – I grew up in a multigenerational family with many, many cousins, so I had a lot of close cousin friendships, but it is not uncommon for people not to know anybody outside the group, even of their own age.

Cindy McLEISH: Yes. I was thinking a little bit about community involvement of the group, and you have got some little bit of involvement through school. Were there any other ways that members of the group or the cult were involved with each of the communities in those small towns?

Laura McCONNELL: No. No, we go to school with them, but we do not go to birthday parties, we do not go to sport, we do not participate in things outside the group – very insular communities.

Cindy McLEISH: What about the adults? Are the adults having regular jobs or do they get involved in a chamber of commerce or the footy club?

Laura McCONNELL: Very rarely. Occasionally you will see an exception to that rule, but for the most part we are taught to keep to our own communities and our own space. People do have mainstream jobs, but they are jobs that fit; you are expected to work a job that fits very much with the lifestyle of the Truth Two by Twos. Often people will work in their own businesses; in my community people are mostly farmers or blue-collar workers who maybe are electricians and the like so that they can run their own business around the meetings and around the expectations of the group. They may hire people from the outside, but very much keep their distance to anyone from the outside world.

Cindy McLEISH: So they are not actively seeking out different organisations within the community that they can be part of and perhaps look at?

Laura McCONNELL: Not typically, no. I mean, I do have a few examples in my head where very, very well-to-do businesspeople, some of the more royalty families, have been involved a little more in community work, but I really think that is a bit more of a front to build their business than to necessarily make genuine connection with the community.

Cindy McLEISH: You mentioned earlier businesses, legitimate businesses, without paperwork, where there is a lack of paperwork within the Two by Twos. You thought money got funnelled into particular businesses and things like that. How does that work, or how do you know that that is the case?

Laura McCONNELL: I do not know that it is the case 100 per cent. I do, however, wonder when you are taking hundreds of dollars every Sunday or every few weeks in cash what you are doing with it if you do not have a company or a church registration in any way. Are you just keeping it in a suitcase under your bed? What are you doing with those cash donations? Because our workers are clergy and they move through the community and they stay in people's homes, those workers tend to choose to stay in the homes of more wealthy people who have better businesses and appear to have the resources to be able to take that money and put it through their businesses. So it makes me suspicious about why you would choose certain families to stay with over other families, and I believe that the money is being put through businesses and into family trusts rather than being kept in suitcases under the bed.

Cindy McLEISH: Not buying – you know, we have heard from others that the church owns quite a –

Laura McCONNELL: We have no property at all in the church name. We have only very select wealthy families.

Cindy McLEISH: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. John.

John LISTER: Thank you very much for coming to speak to us today and sharing your experience. I just wanted to drill down a little bit on what you mentioned earlier about some links with other more extreme religious groups and this declining membership or interest in the Truth Two by Twos. What do you think has been the cause of this? Like, they are still there. There is still obviously that harm happening, but it is obviously not the same number, potentially, as we have seen in the past. What do you think might have changed since the 1990s?

Laura McCONNELL: The internet would be the first one, so people like me creating a website and using a name for the group. The group had no name you could google until, kind of, 2000-ish. It was very difficult to find a name to even find anything out about the group. There have been several large exoduses of people out of the group since the 1990s when the internet enabled people to search. There was this feeling that the group would disintegrate, which has not happened. The people who have stayed behind have actually become more hardcore and more devout, which is sad, because it would be great if it just crumbled. But in fact what happens in these groups is people are so deeply enmeshed in it and – I mean, I now have seven generations of my family in it – they have no other way of life. In fact what is left behind becomes more and more hardcore and, I think, more and more dangerous to be honest, because they are more and more invested.

John LISTER: What do those interactions with other groups look like? You have mentioned marriage is one of those ways, but are there any kind of shared meetings or shared theology between them? Or is it just simply –

Laura McCONNELL: No. The funny thing is they will look at other groups and call the other groups false, despite the fact. They take quite a lot of glee in actually managing to get somebody from another group because ‘That other group is a false group and we are the only way, but we’ve managed to recruit one of these ones from this other false group’, which then gives them more legitimacy internally that they have managed to get someone from this group or that group. No. They are in fact in competition with each other, and they will often even call the other group a cult. They will say, ‘Well, that group is a cult, but we’re not, so they’ve come across to us because we’re not the cult.’ They will use that as evidence for why they are in fact the right way.

John LISTER: Yes. You have mentioned that a lot of the centres for this group are in regional areas. What are some of the factors about these different places like Speed and Ouyen and up in the north-east that make people more vulnerable to being part of these groups?

Laura McCONNELL: Some of that is historical, I think, because there were very big recruitment drives in the 1930s and 40s in rural and regional areas. To be fair, there are followings in places like Burwood, Greensborough and Doncaster here in the city, but the isolation of some of those rural properties, like the Colac one for instance, means you do not see them from the road – it is a family farm. These places were set up generations ago in order to hold these meetings each year. I think these places are a bit of a hangover from the recruitment drives. The families are so deeply entrenched that those farms, held in family names, are still used as a base, and I think will continue to be used as a base going forward because they are isolated and they are able to hide there without anybody really paying attention or being able to ask too many questions.

John LISTER: I have got one really brief question just to follow on from that. In terms of resurgence or potential resurgence, is there any engagement by workers or clergy in this group online to try and spread who they are?

Laura McCONNELL: It is interesting, in the US and Canada there have been a couple. In Australia, no – they have really doubled down on ‘do not go online’. They say nothing online can be trusted and people should not be accessing things online because things online cannot be trusted. They like to talk about fake news and say it is fake news – what people are saying about them online. In the US and Canada I have seen a couple of them attempt some stuff online. In Australia they have created a website as a result of the royal commission. Part of that was that you were meant to apologise to people you had harmed, and so they set up this very

disingenuous website which does not have a name. You would not know who they were. It is not indexed by SEO. So I think they would claim that they have an online presence and that they are trying to engage in the online world, but it is quite disingenuous and not real.

John LISTER: Thank you, thank you.

The CHAIR: Rachel.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you, Laura, for the resilience you have demonstrated. You are exceptionally articulate, so it is very helpful to hear your story in your words. Can you please tell me, when people meet – and you mentioned it was often on people’s farms – how many people would come together and what did they talk about? Was it a very structured meeting, and did it have a real faith base to it? What was the context of it?

Laura McCONNELL: I would say they are pseudo-Christians. They would claim to follow the King James Bible – a literal interpretation of the King James Bible. They cherry-pick that literal interpretation. I do not believe it is mainstream Christian belief. It is a very twisted theology. Mind you, it is never written down, so there is no written theology, so you cannot sit before them and try to debate that theology with them, because in their minds they interpret it from God themselves, and we have to hear it from their mouth in order to understand it. I do not believe, having attended mainstream Christian churches, that that is a Christian interpretation.

There is very much a structure – to speak to a structure. Yes, their services are four times a week. There is a very particular pattern to those services. You need to attend those services in order to hear the word, in order to be saved. If you do not hear the word from those services, you are not saved, and leaving therefore means that you cannot hear their word, which means you are going to hell because you have not heard the word from their mouth. Yes, there are patterns to the services and strict participation is required of members, and if you do not participate in the way that is expected of you in terms of the rituals within the services, that is also grounds for excommunication or being pushed out – if you do not participate in the services in the way that you are meant to.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you. Could you tell me what was the trigger point for you leaving, and was it the first attempt? For somebody who had grown up and was born into it, it would be a very big thing to come to the realisation that this is not appropriate. You spoke about going to a mainstream high school but not being allowed to do extracurricular activities. No doubt you would have been educated to question things and to know what is right and what is wrong to a certain degree. Was that education part of you building up the courage to move on, or was there something that made you go, ‘This is not right, and I can’t tolerate it’?

Laura McCONNELL: I could not articulate, probably for about 15 years, why I had been kicked out. I did go to a mainstream school but I was taught to keep myself very separate from friends. Even things like evolution and religious studies – we were kept out of things like that; we were not allowed to participate in them. In fact, teachers just knew that these kids from our community were not allowed to learn that stuff, so we would sit to the side or we would be taken out to sit in the principal’s office when certain things were taught.

I did not know I was being excommunicated. I went to a service for a few weeks in a row and nobody would speak to me. I felt really uncomfortable, and I did not really understand why they were being the way they were. One day, after about four weeks of that, I was standing at a tram stop. I had come from my community near Swan Hill, and I came here to Melbourne because I wanted an education. I wanted to go to university, and I was standing at a tram stop after a service, and it was bucketing down with rain, and they all drove past me and I was drenched. Something in my head snapped, and I thought, ‘Something is just deeply wrong with what is happening here. I don’t understand what it is,’ and it took me another 15 years to unravel all of that. I just was like, ‘Something is not right.’ These people do not want me. I do not feel like this is right. I then just stopped going back, and nobody ever spoke to me again.

Then I went back to my home community near Swan Hill and said to them, ‘I don’t want to go to this anymore’ and then very quickly found myself ostracised. I would have people cross the street rather than talk to me. In the post office in the tiny town I came from people would pretend they did not know who I was. I could not understand what that was for about 15 years. Even after I was helping other people in the same situation as me, I could never have named that as shunning and excommunication. I just thought there was something wrong with me. I thought, ‘I’m broken. I’m wrong for wanting an education. I’m wrong that I don’t want to be

married. I'm wrong that I've left my community.' Then one day I was speaking to a Jehovah's Witness and talked about shunning, and I was like, 'Oh, shit! That's what happened to me.' It is just that we do not use the word 'shunning'; we use all this other stuff. I did not know that was what was happening to me. We do not have a vocabulary. We just know that if somebody demonstrates that they do not want to be in our community anymore and starts to act in a way that does not fit, we will just shut them out. They are in the world, and we do not want to know anything about them.

I do not think it was my education. It was that they could see that I did not want to be there by the way that I was dressing, by the questions I was asking and the fact that I wanted an education. So they just drove past me and pushed me out.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: There are a few more questions that we would like to include in today's session, if that is okay. So we will run a few minutes over our scheduled time, if that is okay with you, Laura.

Laura McCONNELL: Yes.

The CHAIR: Great. Annabelle, you have got a couple.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Thank you. I will try and be quick. This is just picking up on what some of my colleagues asked, some subsequent questions. Often we hear about women taking 10 to 15 times to leave an abusive relationship if they are in a family violence relationship. Are there any sorts of red flags, say, when you tried to leave, and points of contact with potentially state government agencies where we could potentially get in their support earlier than the leaving, the actual exit? Are there times when they try and exit beforehand, or is it a bit more black and white?

Laura McCONNELL: I would say it is a very long leaving. I often say it is a multi-year, sometimes decade-long process to see people leave. By my first contact to my feeling that they are safe and secure outside is often years. It is often decades. So it is often that they will test – I will often get messages to say, 'Is this what the group's name is?' And I will be like, 'Yes, that's what the group's name is.' Then you will not hear from them again for another couple of months, and then they will come back and say, 'I've done some research and I think I might do X or Y now.' So there is this very long lead that happens, where they are testing who they can trust to talk to, what agencies they can go to. They may reach out along the way and say, 'One of my children is sick and I want to speak to a doctor. Do you have any you recommend?' Then I will say, 'Yes, there are some in your area that I think would be great for your family.' They are testing whether or not services can be trusted along the way. They are testing whether or not you can be trusted along the way. They may disclose to you, 'I'm scared that one of my children is being sexually abused. Where would I go if I'm scared of that?' I had one recently where I was like, 'Well, here is the sex crimes detective's name in Queensland, and I think you should call that number.' Then months later they will call back and say, 'I still haven't called that number but I can trust them, can't I?' And you will be like, 'Yes, you can.' So it is actually giving them tools all the way along to be like, 'These are trusted agencies, these are trusted doctors, these are trusted people who know your lingo, who know who we are and will treat you respectfully all the way along.'

Annabelle CLEELAND: And your support, is that all voluntary?

Laura McCONNELL: Yes.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Wow. And my question – that was a sneaky question. You mentioned a lot about the travelling clergy. I just cannot quite wrap my head around this idea of these perpetrators, alleged perpetrators, that are moving around harming families and children. How does that work, and how can they just come in and form the trust of communities to have such access to vulnerable people?

Laura McCONNELL: We are taught that the world is the dangerous place, not our community, and these people are our workers. They are the people who speak to God. So they believe that they can come into our homes and stay in our homes and then move to the next home two weeks later, a month later or six months later or however that works. Usually every year the overseer of a state will put out a field list of the field that they are in – for instance, there will be a field for Gippsland or there will be a field for the Hamilton area, and they will move within that field over six months or a year between various people's homes. They pick and choose what

homes they want to go to depending on things like how much money that family has or what sort of car that family has, because they do not get formal salaries and do not have their own cars often, so they will live with the family.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Just a couple more from me – touching on Annabelle’s last question around the travelling clergy, you have spoken about a lack of legal accountability, a lack of structures, a lack of leaders being listed with their names on paper and even a complete lack of a name for the group. However, if you have travelling clergy who are going from one town to another to another, to me that suggests there is a high level of organisation behind this group. Someone would have to hold that information in one place. Would you agree with that?

Laura McCONNELL: Yes. We have one overseer per state who most definitely must have information held somewhere – in an Excel spreadsheet somewhere – of this stuff. The other complexity that I grapple with is how many of us are interrelated. Some of our clergy are in fact our uncles, our aunts, our cousins and our second cousins. We grow up with these people who then are embedded in our communities, trust-wise, but they also know where we live and they also know our family businesses and our family farms. They know these communities inside out. I think what people often do not realise is the interconnectedness of our community is very high; these people have often grown up in the same houses as us and then gone on to become clergy, and then they return to the same communities they have grown up in. They know all of us, they know where we live and they know this information implicitly, even if it is not written down. But I do agree that our overseers, even though they are not leaders on paper, must have some kind of information held somewhere.

The CHAIR: Okay. I have got three more questions, and in the interests of time I might ask you to take these on notice if that is okay with you. The first two are around coercive control. Could you give us some examples of how everyday choices such as work, relationships, finances and education were restricted or monitored by the group? The next question – you have spoken a lot about the shunning that you experienced, but we would also like to know how the group enforced compliance and discouraged dissent. For example, were their explicit punishments or implicit pressures or both? Were there things other than shunning that the group used to enforce compliance? Just for my third question, it would be great to have an understanding from you. If someone from the Truth Two by Twos was seeking help from the authorities – say, the first time they reached out to the authorities, to the police or an Orange Door – what sort of response did they receive, and was the response sufficient? If the response was not sufficient, do you have any recommendations about what a sufficient first response might look like?

Laura McCONNELL: Sure. Can do.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Laura.

Laura McCONNELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: We will conclude our meeting here. Laura, can I say thank you so much for appearing before the committee today and for your contribution to the inquiry. We really appreciate the time and effort taken to prepare your evidence, and we acknowledge the significance of your testimony here today. You will be provided with a proof version of today’s transcript to check, together with the questions taken on notice. Verified transcripts and responses to any questions taken on notice will then be published on the committee’s website.

I now declare this meeting adjourned.

Witness withdrew.