

# **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**

Clare Heath-McIvor.

**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 gathering, 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 who are here with us today: Cindy McLeish, the Member for Eildon; Christine Couzens, the Member for Geelong; John Lister, the Member for Werribee; Rachel Westaway, the Member for Prahran; and Jackson Taylor, the Member for Bayswater. Annabelle Cleeland, the Member for Euroa and Deputy Chair, will be joining us shortly.

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

This afternoon the committee will hear from Clare Heath-McIvor. Clare, thank you 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 and is 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.

Clare, I now invite you to make a brief opening statement, and this will be followed by questions from members.

**Clare HEATH-McIVOR:** Thank you so much, and thank you for the ability to speak to you today. I have no doubt that over the course of the inquiry you have heard some pretty harrowing stories and undoubtedly made the same observations that I have made during my time as a survivor, advocate, writer and podcaster in this space: that every story is harrowing in its own right, that the problem is more widespread than we would like to think and that despite every story being one of extraordinarily personal and personalised damage, the markers and patterns are so similar.

I address you today as the co-runner of the Victorian Cult Survivors Network, co-author of the *Beyond Belief* white paper and founding president of Survivors of Coercive Cults and High-Control Groups, but predominantly as a survivor of City Builders Church, a high-control group run by my parents, which I and several others have publicly called a cult. Not all cults are churches and not all churches are cults, but my experience was inside a predominantly white evangelical church. We did not look culty. We were mostly nice and friendly and pretty affable – at least on the surface and in the outer circles. But of course, you can never judge the proverbial book by its cover, and the plot rarely, if ever, announces itself on the first page. The damage sustained in this group run by my father is something I will likely never recover from. The loss of family is something I grieve every day, and we cannot be reconciled due to the cult divide. I would have stayed if I could – if the choice were up to me – but I was shunned during a high-risk pregnancy, and thus began a period of my life in which no area of my personal life, faith, marriage or finances was left untouched.

I am sure you will have questions about City Builders Church. My submission covered problematic homeschool experiences, the role of women, attitudes to LGBTQIA+ people, political infiltration, the contrived campaign to disendorse Darren Chester over his support for marriage equality, efforts to stop marriage equality, sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts – otherwise known as gay conversion – dominionism, abuse cover-ups and more. I have no doubt you will have questions about the methods of influence, indoctrination, coercion, surveillance, shunning, retaliation and control. On these, I am an open book.

But I want to draw your attention to a dark figure – that is, the economic cost of cults. The fiscal studies have not been done. We know that cults are not about belief, though a transcendent belief system does play a role in facilitating subservience and oppressive practices. Cults are about control – about money, sex, power or any combination of these. We tend to pay attention to the sex and power aspects of it more than we pay attention to the money, but as you have seen from data gleaned from your own questionnaire, financial coercion is rampant. Yet that picture is incomplete. Many cults hide behind legitimacy shields, claiming to be a religion or existing as a breakaway sect of a bona fide religion. Many cults extract or demand huge donations from their members and remain tax free. As cult leavers require so much in rehabilitation and ongoing care, the state foots this bill twice – once in lost tax revenue and once in the cost of rehabilitation.

It is common for cult survivors to require psychological and medical care, with many requiring ongoing therapy and medication. Depression, anxiety and PTSD are not the only issues – commonly, chronic pain or chronic illness befall those whose bodies have lived under constant stress and strain until their departure. But many survivors do not escape this stress and strain even after they leave, as stalking, harassment and the impact of developmental trauma linger long after they have left. Many require domestic violence support services, housing, education, child care, disability care, drug and alcohol support, community support and more to help make up for the family and friends they lost in the rupture of their exit. Family courts, sadly, are not equipped to recognise cult involvement or intervene appropriately. Not only this, but a number of cults or high-control groups run rehabilitation programs or community programs whereby the legal system may place vulnerable people in court-mandated contact with cults. A prime example of this is Narconon, a Scientology program, but other therapeutic settings have been highlighted as potentially problematic in similar ways.

At present, numerous alleged cults are, or have recently been, in receipt of government grants. Thus, they benefit from the government purse while operating tax free and potentially exploiting their own members. Often these grants put cults in direct contact with vulnerable people. In your own data 11.7 per cent of respondents said that the cult first made contact during a period of vulnerability. Through these vehicles, government has unwittingly become a major funder of high-control groups and potentially legitimised them in doing so – for example, the Rapid Relief Team, linked to the Exclusive Brethren. This charity places the organisation in direct contact with vulnerable Australians following natural disasters. Recent disclosures made to the ACNC, the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission, show revenue in both the 2022 and 2023 financial years, making government the second largest source of funding for this group outside donations and bequests. Cults or high-control groups may operate enterprises behind the guise of charity or religion, thus skirting taxation despite operating in a capitalist model. They may do so while exploiting labour, engaging in wage theft or modern slavery, and their people may still claim government payments, from which they give to the cults.

The dark figure is immense but unquantified. But let me tell you how it affected me personally or someone like me, for the sake of example. I tithed, ever since my first pay packet from McDonald's at age 14 and nine months, 10 per cent every pay, with the expectation that the first 10 per cent is God's and the next 10 per cent may be an offering if 'God' requires it of you. In mainstream churches tithing is normal practice but is voluntary, optional and anonymous. In cults it is a demand, it is an expectation and it is a sin if you do not comply. Now, thanks to direct deposits, it is traceable, which means disciplinary action can be taken. We were allowed to work, and we were expected to take dominion in our workplaces or in business.

So let us say I earned a median wage of \$72,000 per year. If I were to give the bare minimum – and that is without the call around saying it is time for the covenant group to give more, there is not enough in the kitty; that is without that – I would be giving my tithe of 10 per cent; an offering of, let us say, conservatively, 5 per cent; biannual required trips to Malaysia, where our big head honcho was; required camps and conferences; and church-based enterprise spendings. I would be in the can for roughly \$13,800 per year. Let us say I was in for 20 years. We are up to \$276,000 out of my pocket. Now let us say I am a woman with school-aged children, who is expected to be submissive and homeschool. There were 30 years between my birth and the day that my

younger sister turned 18, so consider that when I give you these figures. In lost wages of 72K per year, lost superannuation, costs of homeschooling and cost of the homeschooling curriculum that is a loss of approximately 80 grand to the household per annum, which is a significant reduction not only in household income but in superannuation, peak employment attainment and outcomes across the lifespan, not to mention outcomes like educational or medical neglect or poor social skills in homeschooled children. The way this mounts up over the years is massive. Then there are post-cult exit costs – remembering that within the context of cult survivorship I fared pretty well. I can run a business, and I can self-fund my recovery for the most part. My medical costs are around \$13,000 per year – a cost I will likely bear for the rest of my life, before we get to the mere fact that due to my PTSD I am unlikely to ever be able to work in corporate again, even though I could double my wage if I did.

When I left the group my then husband and I had a property and we ran a cafe that was co-owned by another cult member. Both were sold at a loss at or around the time of our departure. I may never own property again. Retirement is a possibility that gets less likely as I age. It is a bleak silver lining for the state, though, because you guys will likely pay for my retirement. All-cause morbidity and mortality for people with PTSD and chronic or stress related illness are elevated in comparison to those without them. So my lifespan may be shorter, but I will drain your PBS and your Medicare in the meantime.

At the time of my departure from City Builders, talk of setting up a self-managed superannuation fund to purchase a building my dad had wanted for decades and believed to be God's destiny for us was ramping up. They now own that building through a convoluted arrangement that appears on public records as a proprietary limited shareholding but is listed in parliamentary disclosures as a unit trust owned by a self-managed superannuation fund. The 24 listed beneficial shareholders are all inner-circle members of the church, and the church, an organisation listed with the ACNC as a charity register, rents the building from them, effectively separating the assets from the charity to deliver a private investment return to key people, four of whom are responsible people listed on the church's ACNC register. I am no forensic accountant; all I have is access to public records and records of prior conversations around setting up the self-managed superannuation fund and the possibilities with regard to the purchase.

I am no charity governance expert, but if the arrangement is as it seems, it falls well short of governance standard 5, 'Duties of responsible people', around related party transactions and ensuring that conflicts of interest are disclosed and that the charity acts honestly and fairly in the best interests of the charity for its charitable purposes, not the personal benefit of the charity executive and key stakeholders.

I do not know the rules around non-arms-length use of commercial interest in self-managed super funds or the protections from risk or predatory arrangements that self-managed super funds are supposed to offer. But I do know that self-managed super funds, if that is indeed what is going on here, cannot lend or provide financial assistance to members or related parties, including employers and family members, and that no-one associated with your self-managed super fund should receive a present-day benefit from its investments.

I am no corporations law expert, but I know that there are 24 people listed on the investment in question, where small-scale investments are limited to 20 people under section 708 of the *Corporations Act*. This is just a taste of the conflicts of interest that the church engages in. At best, this is predatory conflict of interest, poor governance and opaque structures. At worst, this is abusive and illegal. What is without question is that this was a vision God gave to Dad, and we were trained to lay our lives down for the cause and to hold nothing back in covenant.

A church organisation like this being in control of superannuation of members who live in covenant like this is unethical at the very best. How then do these people access their super when they retire? How do they access it if they leave? How were 'Thus saith the Lord' and an accountant who was a spiritual son of my dad used to extract or even coerce superannuation and then extract thousands of volunteer hours from church members to do the renovation? And were they actively increasing the value of this asset even though they were not connected to it?

I also know that we answer to a guru in Malaysia, an apostle named Jonathan David, legal name K Mahenthiran, who instructed us on how to engage in the Australian political system, in what parties and on what topics. This now reeks of foreign influence to me, that this has never truly been investigated. In addition to this, he extracted massive donations from many under his influence for a building project that simply never

materialised, massive donations to an overseas ministry for the sake of building a kingdom. Even vulnerable people gave out of meagre budgets. Adding up the health costs and demands placed on members affecting their income, superannuation, investments and donations, between victim-survivors of cults and the wider community, lost tax revenue, productivity, community resources, recovery and support, the total costs are unquantified but immense.

Presently numerous agencies exist in silos and hold maybe a single attribute of cult damage within their remit, but they are not equipped to recognise this for what it is. We need a specific form of harm – group-based coercive control – to capture the specific ways in which coercive control occurs in the context of groups. It is distinct from intimate partner violence, although this absolutely occurs in many cult settings. It is distinct from modern slavery and human trafficking, although this occurs in some cult settings, and distinct from child abuse, sexual abuse or even violent extremism, although these occur in some cult settings. We need a group-based coercive control law and funding for research, education and recovery. But most of all we need an independent monitor or commission, survivor-led, run with lived-experience expertise at the centre of it, to coordinate cross-departmental, cross-sectoral responses.

One of my great pleasures is delivering cult education in secondary schools. I will say now, like I have said many times, every person who is going to be in a relationship, a volunteer organisation, a church, a team, a club or a group scenario needs to know what coercive control looks like. We have started to move the envelope on intimate partner violence in this scenario. This inquiry gives us the impetus to begin to move toward an understanding of what healthy, non-coercive community looks like and what is completely unacceptable in any setting, no matter the belief system. I welcome the committee's questions.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Clare, for your opening statement. I will hand over to Cindy for the first questions.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Okay, great. Look, thank you for coming in. We have had lots of submissions, and we have certainly begun our inquiries. A number of things people are saying are quite consistent, particularly around coercive control in groups, and you have touched a little bit on the money and schooling. Some of the groups that we have heard of actually run or have childcare arrangements or things like that. Is that something that your church was involved with?

**Clare HEATH-McIVOR:** Yes, back in the earlier days – this was probably some, I think, 15 or 20 years ago now – we did have a childcare centre called the Little Friends Occasional Care Centre. It is an opportunity to connect with young families. God, I am talking like a cult member immediately; I still sometimes speak in the present tense. It was an opportunity to connect with families, with single parents, with parents that were overloaded. It would give us insight into who we could connect with and potentially bring onto prayer lists and begin to recruit. So that was something we did. I have heard of efforts to start up childcare centres in a lot of places. I have not been monitoring City Builders. It is not good for my mental health to do so. But I do know that there are businesses that are run out of City Builders that do access children and normalise the venue to people who normally would not bring their kids to church.

Homeschooling was a practice that we engaged in throughout my childhood. I was homeschooled from grade 1 right the way through to year 12. We had a homeschool group. It was encouraged strongly within the church to homeschool, and we would have get-togethers every Friday. I think it was to help socialise us, but this was all completely within the context of the church.

There have been a couple of foster kids who were fostered by a couple within the church. They are Indigenous. They were placed in a house with white parents, I believe – I have not checked the ancestry of the parents. But at one point concerns were raised over the suitability of the housing, and the church came together to make sure that these kids would stay within the care of the church. I think the eldest one is above 18 now but I believe the youngest one would be about 16 or 17, still very much in the life of the church, as we called it.

Vulnerable young people were often – I mean, we ran school programs so that we could get access to young kids before their attitude was set or before they had developed their first romantic relationship.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Who staffed them?

**Clare HEATH-McIVOR:** All volunteers from the church.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Are there credentials required?

**Clare HEATH-McIVOR:** A working with children check for those of us who were above the age of 18, but yes, it was all volunteer run, very much in line with endearing ourselves to the local community and getting access to kids who we could then bring further into training programs, discipleship programs, before their attitude was too set. Several of these young people actually ended up leaving their homes, encouraged to as maybe their parents did not understand their faith, and they would end up in group homes. When I say 'group homes', you do not need to live on a commune in a town the size of Sale, but there were several houses. There would be an inner-circle couple who might have a couple of kids and then they would have three or four other vulnerable young people living with them. At one stage in my four-bedroom, one-bathroom house we had, I think, five boarders –

**Cindy McLEISH:** It sounds like you have got the recruitment methods, and it is quite insular. Did you have any community involvement? Were people or the church engaged with external community groups, or was everything quite insular?

**Clare HEATH-McIVOR:** We were a dominionist cult, although that is not how they identify themselves. They do say things like 'dominion in every domain' or 'crossing over to take over' and they do have meetings about how to take dominion in politics or business or stuff like that. We engaged, right from when I was 14, in a program called training for life, which was very discipleship. This is learning to lay down your life for the vision of the church, learning to live in subjection to God, and other people would disciple you or mentor you so you are really spilling your guts. From age 14 we would volunteer for organisations like the Sale community business association, which to my knowledge is now run by an assistant pastor at City Builders. We would volunteer scrubbing banners for them, but that volunteer work would endear us to them.

There was strong discouragement to access psychological help. Psychologists were viewed as quite demonic for a while. I remember when I attempted to get help for post-traumatic stress disorder being forbidden to cast the church in a negative light. When one of my counsellors asked whether I was in a cult, it caused instant panic, and I changed counsellors and eventually disengaged from the mental health care system, because you must represent the church in a good light everywhere you are. They preach about being as one man in the community, meaning one message, one heart, one agenda, and essentially this means that there is no freedom of thought but also you do not go anywhere by yourself; you do not go in as one person. When I got a job at Macca's, two others joined me at Macca's, so there were the three of us; we were the 'God squad'. I think there were two or maybe three that worked at KFC – like, this is as 15-year-olds. Then it was the newspaper; they wanted journalists there, then we ended up almost running the advertising department. Currently the editor of the newspaper is City Builders, and it is significant because when sexual abuse against a minor occurred in a sister cult that is functionally annexed with City Builders in the same area – when the pastor's son sexually offended against a minor – that was reported in the newspaper as 'hugging and kissing a child', not adequately covered as sexual assault. This is, to me, egregious because it retraumatizes the victim and it actually [audio dropout]

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Clare, for the interruption. Please continue.

**Clare HEATH-McIVOR:** So the reporting of that assault as hugging and kissing a child was not only immensely re-traumatizing for the victim in question but it was on the back of a nine-year cover-up in which the mother had been treated in egregious ways: she had been called a Jezebel, she had been called names, she had been criticised for sticking up for her child who had been the victim of an assault, and she had been in meetings where they tried to broker some sort of arrangement. It never went to the police until nine years later, and even then the churches banded behind the offender here. Both churches, Kingsway and City Builders, are in a 'covenant', and they are both in the ISAAC network under Dr Jonathan David – K Mahenthiran – and this kind of harm is an attack of the enemy against the pastors or it is an attack of the enemy against the perpetrator and the victim, and the people who stick up for the victim are treated as Jezebels, are treated as dissenters. I told a person about this – a person who is very close to the inner circle, who I will not name; I said, 'Did you know about this? Did Dad know about this? Was he part of the coverup?' Because he and this other pastor tell each other everything, because of 'covenant', and this person said to me, 'They're just offended.' I said to them, 'Sexual abuse should be offensive. It is okay for that to be offensive,' and it did not go down well, because being offended is painted as being a worse thing than actually being a person who raises concerns over crimes like this.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Clare. I would like to ask some questions about the work that you are doing now as an advocate for other survivors. Can you tell us more about your work with other survivors from high-control groups?

**Clare HEATH-McIVOR:** Yes, I started as a podcaster soon after my then husband and I were shunned. Thinking had been, like, strongly discouraged while I was in the group. I would often be mocked for being too 'thinky thinky' – for, you know, doing my own reading or exploring topics that were not really approved. I was frequently mocked for that – very much painted as a problem child. So I stepped into the evangelical and fundamentalist high-control religion space because at that point I thought my church was normal. I thought these practices were normal. I very soon realised they are not. I very soon realised it is not mainstream orthodoxy. It is not mainstream in many, many ways, although that is what it appears on the surface. So gradually I started working with other survivors of high-control groups. It was definitely easier for me to identify that way because calling your dad a cult leader is not comfortable. It is not my favourite thing; it is not what I want him to be.

But soon, like, I had been puddling away on Twitter, I had been puddling away on Substack, writing, exploring my way through this and drawing together a lot of research and commentary from a lot of places and going, okay, there are a lot of concerning things here. A while ago I had been speaking with somebody who was interested in me writing a book on Christian nationalism, and they suggested I get across on TikTok – which I hate, being a TikToker; I am too old for this, but it is what it is – and I connected with Ryan and Catherine Carey and Laura McConnell-Conti, Renee Spencer and some other people who are doing spectacular work in this space. But it immediately became clear to me that cults become enmeshed with religion, even though they are two separate issues, and that many attempts to regulate or to stop the damage of cults get hamstrung by constitutional rights to freedom of religion, belief and association – freedoms that we must maintain, we absolutely must maintain. It is inappropriate for the state to be saying, 'You can believe this; you can't believe this.' This has been a problem since Constantine, you know, back in the way, way back church. The enmeshment of church and state is problematic. However, the Venn diagram is not a circle, but there are overlaps between, you know, those fringe sects, those groups that creep further and further out onto the extremes. We are in a time in history where there is a big risk for that, because we are seeing what doomsday cults would be reading as the four horses of the apocalypse. We have got death and pestilence in the form of COVID. We have got wars in the form of Israel and Gaza, which is particularly emotive for people who were raised with a rapture or apocalyptic anxiety. There would be this feeling that Jesus is coming back soon. Now, I am speaking from a white evangelical fundamentalist, very predominantly white, you know, fundamentalist thing here. I do need to say, and I will say it a million times, cults are not about belief. It is about behaviour, and there are non-white cults, and there are immigrant groups and there are, you know, all of the things, but this anxiety is there.

I stepped into this space based on 10 years of blogging and podcasting and exploring it all and going, 'Oh, this isn't normal orthodoxy,' but also starting to go – like, my ex-husband is a systems thinker, is a very handy policy head; he was the main author behind the *Beyond Belief* paper, which he knows back and forth but I need a printout of 67 pages here to help me – through really extracting the fact that the legitimacy shields used by cults are problematic, and of course they are going to identify themselves as the one truth, of course they are going to think that their gospel or their transcendent belief system is the one truth, of course they are going to believe that it is urgent in these unprecedented times to march this forward. I was just accosted by some evangelist down the street earlier, and I was like, 'Sure, I'll take your flyer. I'm off to the cult inquiry.' That was probably cruel, but anyway, all of these elements come together, and messaging around this is really important.

Religious freedom is a false flag here, because what we are talking about – the acronym is DEAD, which is morbid: D-E-A-D – with religious freedom is not the freedom to defraud, exploit, abuse or deceive. What happens in these groups is that we are not even consenting to join cults. You do not go, 'Hi. I'm Clare McIvor and I'm from a cult. Will you join this cult?' You consent to go to a barbecue with a friend – which is not a grooming allegation, but it is the first step: 'Come to this barbecue. I'll introduce you to some of my friends. You're doing nothing on a Saturday night anyway. Come in.' They are the nicest group of people that you have ever met, and then it is like, 'Oh, come and do this course.' A classic example is the Man Up program: 'Come and do this course. It's about becoming a better father and a better man.' You do not know that it is connected

to an extremist group over in New Zealand that has been done for, actually, violent clashes, being anti-trans and all the classic kind of white Christian nationalist flags – anti women’s rights and all of that kind of stuff. This church over in New Zealand has actually assaulted people – women, minors – at these things. There is a Man Up program down in City Builders in Sale. It is, ‘Come into this course that is about being a better father’, ‘Come into this course about women’s empowerment’ or ‘Come into this course about healing sexual trauma’. Then in those courses you are moving just a little bit further down the indoctrination and emotional buy-in. You are going, ‘Yeah, I might feel better about this after doing this course.’

Are you going to bail after that course? No. They have got their claws in, because now they know your abuse stories, now they know your insecurities and your deepest weaknesses and now you are more likely to be taken further in. ‘How about some one-on-one mentoring where we can really help you with this?’ Then at that point you are pouring out your life story. There is no such thing as confidentiality in these groups. It flies around like fire. It is a race to the top. Then surveillance culture kicks in, but by this stage you are absolutely believing that they know what is good for you and that your family and friends on the outside just do not understand the truth that you now understand. They just do not understand why you need to be part of it so much. Then the persecution complex happens and the us-and-them divide happens.

I have moved so far off the question, because I get nerdy about this.

**The CHAIR:** That is okay, Clare.

**Clare HEATH-McIVOR:** Bring me back.

**The CHAIR:** I might move to another question, if that is okay –

**Clare HEATH-McIVOR:** Absolutely.

**The CHAIR:** about your advocacy work. Having worked with many survivors yourself, what forms of support would make the greatest difference to survivors but are currently missing?

**Clare HEATH-McIVOR:** All of them. Okay, I will tell you about something that happened last week. One person that I was working with called a helpline. Unfortunately, I had sat beside this person in Family Court, where some egregious harm had been disclosed, and I heard the judge say words to the effect of, ‘I can’t treat this coercive control issue as abuse because it’s a religious issue.’ This is a woman who had text message evidence of having come out to their husband as queer, then having him try to rape her straight and having done that while lying in bed beside their then two- or three-year-old who woke up during the assault and tried to fight him off. I have seen text message evidence of this. Even though that is the case, even though there were concerns over many other aspects of that relationship, I watched that victim fold up and go. She just folded up inside. She had escaped. We were unable to house her in Melbourne because of Melbourne’s violence against women problem. It took five months to house her.

During this point we were supporting her ourselves. During this time she had had numerous different – just on every level, this was messed up. But she called this domestic violence helpline, and she spoke to somebody on the phone who googled the alleged cult that this person had escaped and said, ‘Oh, no, it looks quite normal to me. It looks like they just believe the Bible’. Well, on a website of course it is going to look like they just believe the Bible. They are not going to say ‘We’re a cult’ on the website. That person then started talking about how Charlie Kirk was a good man, and about these culture wars and cancel culture, and then the victim said, ‘I’m sorry, we can’t talk about this. I’m from a background that involves doomsday prepping and that involves all this other stuff.’ And then that person on that line began to basically blame queer people for homophobia.

Frontline training is absolutely vital. Family court training is absolutely vital. They are not able to adequately recognise the dangers that happen in high-control cults. To say ‘I can’t treat this coercive control issue as abuse because it’s a religious issue’ is absolutely egregious. It cannot happen, because spousal rape is totally okay in some of these cults – this idea that women cannot consent because they are property, they belong to their husbands, they are handed from their fathers to their husbands like cattle. Often when domestic violence is actually reported from within churches to other members of leadership, these women will repeatedly be told to submit more, to never make a fool of him and to essentially just be less problematic and he will not do these things. But the idea of consent is completely absent from this. We need frontline services training, so they know



the keywords to look out for, because you cannot say to someone, 'Oh, I've heard that word – you're in a cult.' We need frontline services training that needs to be survivor led, that needs to be led with lived-experience expertise. We need funding for research and education, including intelligence gathering. And I would say also a lot of this needs to be preventative. We need to be educating people on what healthy community looks like versus what coercive control looks like in group settings. That is absolutely vital. But you will note on page something of the *Beyond Belief* document, we actually map out 30 different areas of law that hold maybe a single aspect of cultism in their remit and 21 different agencies that may have a little – and this includes government agencies that may have some aspect of this.

We cannot coordinate a response to this without an independent monitor that is able to coordinate aspects of this, and I will say upfront there needs to be an independent monitor because of coordinated efforts to infiltrate political parties and to centrally control an agenda. You cannot end up with a member of a cult – a member of an alleged cult – heading up this commission and then being able to essentially put people in the line of harm saying, 'This is a religious freedom issue'. It is not. It is an issue of abuse.

So there are some things.

**The CHAIR:** Christine.

**Chris COUZENS:** Thanks, Clare. I really appreciate your submission, your contribution today and your podcast, which is really interesting to listen to.

**Clare HEATH-McIVOR:** Interesting.

**Chris COUZENS:** No, it is great. Thank you. We really appreciate you making the effort to put this forward, and I think we all know that we are relying on people like you to give evidence so we can go on this journey and see what comes of it.

**Clare HEATH-McIVOR:** Thank you for your role in this too. I know how much you worked with Ryan and Catherine – deeply appreciated.

**Chris COUZENS:** Thank you. So can you tell us a bit more about your decision to leave the group and what the biggest challenges were?

**Clare HEATH-McIVOR:** All of them. As a born-in member, I was not recruited the same way everybody else was. This was my family of origin that grew a church around our family dynamics. I was eight or nine when Dad took over the church, which was an unremarkable evangelical church up until that point. Since having read or heard from other survivors, I now know that with the things that I noted as a little bit kind of anti-woman, a little bit authoritarian back as an eight- or nine-year-old – I had no words for this – there was actually a lot worse stuff going on back then, which is really difficult to reflect on. I had moments of 'this is clashing with other aspects of the Bible,' but 'No, just read what you're being told to read.' Or there were moments like when I was 16 and I told Dad I was out, I did not want to be part of it, and I was hauled out into the car park and made to repent and give my life to Christ. It was actually at a church down in Melbourne where Dad was supposed to be preaching, and I had been hauled out there because I was not jumping in worship and I was not holding my hands up. I had had moments, but I also had no external support. We related with other people like they were down here and we were reaching out to them to convert them. There was not a peer-to-peer relationship or a trusted relationship with anyone else outside. I was homeschooled. With McDonald's, we had the God squad in there with other people. At every stage I was pretty much surveilled and literally surveilled at some points.

I tried to escape to Melbourne. The plan was to sort of disappear and then just never go back. But I was placed in a sister church that was also quite problematic. I was placed in some significantly abusive situations. But when I disclosed these to Dad, he said, 'Don't come home until it's fixed. This is on you. Don't ruin the work.' I was told that God had a big destiny for Australia, that we would host the last great move of the Lord, the Great South Land of the Holy Spirit, and I was the one who was stopping that. I was basically put in the path of my abuser again and again and again. When I say in the path of my abuser, I mean half-naked in his basement getting massages and nonconsensual counselling sessions where he would coach me towards suicide: 'You're so broken beyond repair', 'You're never going to be okay', 'Hey, by the way, women fail at suicide attempts so much more often because they choose less lethal means,' blah, blah, blah, 'Men do it this way' – really

horrendous stuff. I then could not escape the way I wanted to. I ended up having to go back because I had raging PTSD. I was not able to get good faith counselling because I had to protect the church.

In the lead-up to our exit my then husband and I were trying for children. I had four miscarriages within the course of one year and sought external counselling because I was not coping with that. I was not coping with the way my abuse had been covered up. I was not coping with the way I had endless demands to shut down negative emotion, to not have anxiety, to not have anger, to not have sadness, to be constantly presenting the peace and joy of the Holy Spirit and our one true gospel and all that sort of thing. This was causing problems between my husband and my dad. There was increasing demand for me to actually work with my abuser in this other church because we were to take dominion in politics and we had the 'pattern from heaven' to be able to do that.

On 11 November I found out I was pregnant for the fifth time. That would end up being the first pregnancy I carried to term. That day my dad came round for a pastoral care visit to see how my husband was doing. He comes and his shoulders are rounded forward, and he is kind of marching up like this. I was driving out for lunch with my friends, and I went, 'That doesn't look very caring. Do I stay or do I go?' and I thought, 'I can't deal with this,' so I left. When I came back, Dad was slamming the door and leaving. I tried to broker a reconciliation that night, because I wanted to save them. I did not want them to be a cult. I did not want them to be harmful to people – I did not. I loved them. I knew that if there was a conflict that was not able to be resolved, we would end up shunned, and we ended up shunned.

From that day we were stood down off rosters for music. I had been on the music team almost every week – very rarely missed a week for decades. We were no longer being invited to spontaneous get-togethers. All of a sudden you are dealing with the loneliness of having been shunned within the group. I tried so many times to broker a chat with Mum and Dad to try to bring us back together, to try to save the situation, but eventually we had to resign via a letter to my parents and to the covenant group.

From that point people were given false information. I was called crazy. I heard back from a medical practitioner that they had been told I had had a perinatal psychosis, a change of personality. I had people come around to visit me expecting a psychotic mess, and they were getting somebody with a full face of make-up, a tidy house, who was writing neuroscience for a living, and they are going, 'Hang on.' I had pastors fly in from Papua New Guinea. I had pastors fly in from Melbourne to try to confront us. They were given a false story, but when we said, 'This is what really happened,' they said, 'Pastor Brian wouldn't lie' – the same thing that we heard from so many members of the church.

We marched across to the local Baptist church. By the way, for those who say that I am anti-religion: no. That experience was really healing for me because I was in a church with accountability, with full financial disclosure and with child safe practices. I would say to the pastor, 'You used this scripture; I've only ever heard it used this way.' He would be like, 'Do you want a coffee? Let's sit down and have a coffee and chat about it.' When we raised problems with them that we were having, processing my husband's recovery from gay conversion therapy and his accepting that he was not destined for eternal conscious torment in hell if he ever, you know, acted on those feelings – yes, I knew that that would end to the end of my marriage, but I was fighting for a family relationship, which I now have, which is beautiful – they did not shame us. They did not say, 'Right, you're stood down from the music roster. You're stood down from running a bible study.' They just said, 'How can we help you?' To me, that was the difference between a healthy church and something that is cultic.

**Chris COUZENS:** I am conscious of time. Thank you for that. I just wanted to ask you what your 16-year-old self would have wanted back then to be able to leave?

**Clare HEATH-McIVOR:** A friend, someone I could tell the truth to. In these groups – they are closed systems – that simply does not exist. My therapist once told me that if there had have been a single protective adult around me, there would have been DHS reports in about my family. I was doing a huge amount of babysitting during the week, a huge amount of helping my children – my children! – my siblings, because they were homeschooled too. I was getting up early to finish my schooling, to help them with theirs, to then go to McDonald's and work my shifts, to then go to church things. I got into adulthood exhausted. But there is so much distrust of the outside world. There is so much, 'The worldly system is this, but we're the godly system.' It is really us and them. That is an entrenched thing throughout all cults. I do not know what would have saved

me as a 16-year-old. I would want to go back and tell her, 'Yes, get the hell out. It's going to be okay if you do.' I would have told her to do it 10 years earlier, but we cannot have that time back.

**Chris COUZENS:** Yes. Great. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks. John.

**John LISTER:** Thank you, Clare. Thank you for sharing that and particularly the reflection that you made in your opening statement on the extent to which these groups are within society and are within structural parts of our society as well, whether that is service delivery or financial arrangements with the state. You have also mentioned that there are issues of inappropriate political interference. I really want to get into this sense of where we are looking to in terms of making sure that this is not in our systems. I want to be really specific because I am conscious of time –

**Clare HEATH-McIVOR:** I can stay late if need be, by the way, guys.

**John LISTER:** No worries. What I wanted to ask was whether or not there are three signs or questions that a government agency should ask in the process of funding an organisation? What are three specific things we can ask?

**Clare HEATH-McIVOR:** Oh, lord. Wouldn't that be nice? I am just looking through to see the right page. We have partially addressed this in *Beyond Belief*. SOCCHG, sorry, Survivors of Coercive Cults and High-Control Groups, the law reform advocacy agency that I have set up with other survivors, is really mapping out the structural weaknesses that you can look for in groups versus the systemic coercive control acts. It is in *Beyond Belief*. I do suggest that you call Patrick McIvor before the committee to answer this in depth; he is a more of a regulatory head than me. But there are structural risks that we can look for in these groups. We can look for charismatic or controlling leadership, a leader who answers to no-one or who has a fake accountability structure and opaque decision-making or financial practices. ACNC is a classic example of this. Are they fully disclosing or is it a partial disclosure? Are they hiding behind legitimacy shields going, 'We're under a certain amount. We're not going to give you an item-by-item.'

Something else: within City Builders, if the budget was a bit low, calls would go around the covenant group to say, 'Who can chip in a bit of extra money? We haven't paid Pastor Brian enough at this point,' – it was usually about Dad – or 'We can't send him to Malaysia' or 'We can't send him on this thing,' and we would give until it hurt. Deceptive recruitment is something else, as is intense group commitment demanding loyalty, time, labour or cost. Classically members' personal experience is invalidated by the group. There is a strict ideology that shapes every part of life. 'Us versus them' thinking is classic, and there is shared in-group language, rules and practices. Those are the structural risks that you are going to look for. The tricky thing here is that I do think part of the independent monitor or commission that you set up needs to have a research element so we can actually look into some of this. There is a lot of chatter that we hear as anti-cult advocates. As the ones that are more visible on TikTok or Twitter, we get some pretty horrendous stuff coming through to our inboxes.

And I will say this: a lot of the time, the witnesses are treated as crazy. And do you know what – they have been through so damn much that of course it is going to affect their mental health. Some of them will present with a desperation to be heard that might read as unhinged or unstable, but they get to be that because they have been through some pretty horrendous stuff. But we need to be able – in that independent commission – to actually do some of that intelligence gathering. Where are we hearing this chatter? Scientology is known as being cultic – we know it from the documentaries that we have from overseas – and yet Narconon just sits across to the side. Then there are things like the Rapid Relief Team. They are doing good work – of course they are doing good work; natural disasters matter – but what is happening there? Are they using this to access vulnerable people and then begin to radicalise them? It is a really valid question.

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

**The CHAIR:** Great, thanks. Rachel.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** Thank you, Clare. I appreciate this must be exceptionally difficult to speak about, although you have been doing a lot of advocacy in this space. But when it comes down to close family members, it is very hard.

**Clare HEATH-McIVOR:** Horrendously, yes.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** I know that your mum and dad were lead pastors, and I am wondering if you can provide any light in regard to whether you felt that they thought this was fraudulent. I know this is hearsay, but you spoke about false accountability, you spoke about hiding behind legitimacy, you spoke about payments to Pastor Brian if the budgets were not in line and he would not be able to go to Malaysia, and you spoke about behaviour that was very controlling and perhaps what was put out from him. Because you were in the inner sanctum and because you were part of the family of the people in the highest levels, was there ever an indication that your parents knew this was fraudulent or that it was problematic, or was it a belief system of theirs and was always about God?

**Clare HEATH-McIVOR:** That is a difficult question to answer, because frankly – hi, guys – they are likely to be watching. I say this with all the kindness in my heart that I can, because I do miss my mother extremely, but because of her proximity to Dad we cannot have an open relationship. My mother has never been able to disagree with him in public, because our house was always full of people. I never heard her disagree with him in private either. She homeschooled. She exclusively socialised with people from within the group. She never held a full-time job. She was not in a position to disagree. She was in a position to agree, to submit, and that is what women are expected to do – to be under male headship. If they are not, they are jezebels, they are problematic, they are all of these things. I am a hell of a jezebel, by the way, guys – a great line to have in Hansard.

But as for Dad, I cannot tell you that hand on heart. I do know that when he began – he had attempted to become a priest earlier. He became reconverted during the Catholic Charismatic Renewal of the late 1970s and 80s. He did not last long in the seminary; I have heard several different stories on why that is. Then he took over this church and he just wanted people to meet Jesus. But he was also very frustrated with the jezebels in the church. He changed the locks almost instantly so that the jezebels – the women that were strong or whatever – were not able to access the church. He marched them out of leadership, and it went from a church of 70 to a church of 35 very quickly, because that many people left.

There is this idea within New Apostolic Reformation churches that even though the Bible cautions us against adding to or subtracting from the word of God, they believe in this thing where if you are an apostle, you have a special line to God, you have new revelation. I strongly believe that these people mistake the voice of their own ego for the voice of God and then believe it 100 per cent. But I have also heard charismatic or NAR leaders say the government of God is higher than the government of man. We are the answer – you know, ‘This is the way, the truth and the life’. And these are sometimes scriptures that have been cherry-picked and sometimes just nice lines that justify that the true authority and the moral compass of the nation is what happens in this group’s transcendent belief system. I will note that after Scott Morrison’s electoral defeat he appeared at Horizon church and he said something to similar effect – ‘We don’t look to the government of man; we look to the government of God.’ And therefore the rule of law comes secondary to what they believe is a higher truth.

Practices like gay conversion therapy, which is properly called ‘sexual orientation or gender identity change efforts’, even though that is illegal I have heard and I have grave concerns that it is happening. It is still happening because according to them the government of God is higher, and they have cherry-picked and they have read their theology in a way that is homophobic. Progressive theologians will tell you that the queer history of the Bible is there in black and white, and red. But this practice, even though it has been proven to be only harmful and has been classified by the UN as torture, still goes on in places like this because they believe that this truth is higher. It is a deeply held belief.

But when you have some of these – and I will say that when it comes to the anti-authority thing, City Builders is probably, well, you know, it was not the worst. But then immediately after my sister’s election to Parliament, she stepped in front of a hot camera out at the Freedom Party’s launch where we had some of these more extreme anti-authority, anti-vax, anti-lockdown mandate, anti anti antis all out in that Rowville thing. It was really interesting, because when these people come together, ‘Oh, God’s telling me that the government of God is higher than the government of man’, ‘Oh, God’s telling me that we need to cross over to take over’, ‘God’s telling me that we need to take dominion in politics’, ‘Hey, let’s get together and plan it.’ You know, ‘You can go into the Liberal Party and you can beef up that faction. You can go into the National Party and you can beef up that faction. Hey, network with these other ones that are out on the fringes. Let’s talk about how we can centrally control an agenda’ and how we can centrally control a PR campaign which makes an issue look like

there is a groundswell of community grassroots support for it when it is actually just not there. It is very easy to contrive that.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** Thank you, Clare. I was really keen to be quite specific about, you know, the senior people in the church and their ideology, and I think you have answered that question. I appreciate that, thank you.

**Clare HEATH-McIVOR:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Jackson, did you have a question?

**Jackson TAYLOR:** Yes, thank you, Chair, and thank you, Clare, for coming along today and for obviously sharing your story with us. My question is how were relationships, marriages or even sexuality controlled within the group, and how did that affect your own personal life?

**Clare HEATH-McIVOR:** Well, I think you probably already know I was in an arranged marriage to a ‘gay conversion success story’. Spoiler alert. Thankfully he is a wonderful man. I had turned down several matches before this. I agreed to this one because we did have a natural affinity for each other, but also he treated me as an equal, and that was vitally important. But we were part of a purity culture movement where we wore purity rings. It is a popular movement – saving sex for marriage – over in the States. It was this huge thing in the 90s and the early 2000s. But there were some mainstream iterations of this – you know, the Jonas Brothers wore their purity rings until they did not anymore, and, you know, that was fun. But with us, we went by this courtship gospel. What would happen is, you know, let us say Harry thinks that Sally is pretty nice, but instead of going to Sally, he goes to the pastor and says, ‘I think God’s spoken to me about Sally.’ The pastor will then pray about it and will then make an approach.

That did not happen with Patrick and me – Dad set Patrick and me up – but with others the approach was made first, and if Dad said no, it was a nonstarter. If young people chose to date, then that relationship would be severed or they would be shunned from the youth group – they would be unwelcome to continue attending. It was a big deal. We stalked people who were allegedly hooking up; you know, they had been spotted down at the common – the Sale wetlands; it was a great hook-up spot, apparently. I never got to live that life, but you know. Then we would tell the covenant group, and then the covenant group would then maybe publicly shame them. Other young people – I remember one. They were caught together. At 7 in the morning she was around at Dad’s house repenting and the guy in question had been shunned and sent over to Kingsway for rehabilitation. This is the same church that covered up the sex offences of the pastor’s son – pretty horrendous.

There was no sex before marriage, obviously. We were not supposed to kiss before marriage either, and I remember after Patrick and I got married Dad bragged about how our first kiss was at the altar, but I did need a test run – I did need to at least kiss the guy – so I kissed the guy twice before we married, just short of my 30th birthday. There was even control over what sex acts were okay and what were not. It kind of came across in jokes about certain things, but you knew a joke was being mocked. You could not talk about your sex life with anyone else. You could not ask questions. You certainly could not google it, because use of pornography or googling inappropriate things online was really, really frowned upon in the church, and at one point we did have software on our computers that actually reported our viewer history to other covenant brothers. It is something called Covenant Eyes; google it, it is a thing. But basically any skin – anything that is not deemed appropriate – would be shot to someone else in the covenant group. The idea was that we were supposed to confront one-on-one, but the gossip in the group meant that everybody knew when somebody had been pinged by Covenant Eyes. It was pretty hard core.

But also gender nonconforming or queer young people – there were exorcisms, there was heavy mentoring against it. We were linked to a gay conversion provider. Obviously Patrick went through gay conversion with him, as did several others in the group. Dad later annexed that church, and we were able to help this particular provider to leave City Builders, so yes, we helped our gay conversion provider exit a group that was too extreme for him.

The controls on sex and sexuality were perhaps the most – I will not say perhaps the most extreme; every element of it was tightly controlled. But it is the one that outlasts, because even years later – like, I am 42. I have been separated from my husband for five years. We would get divorced if either of us were not an absolute ball of chaos who cannot administrate their way out of a paper bag. But even I, as a 42-year-old

woman – dating is a nightmare because purity culture lives inside my head. I am still policing myself according to that purity culture doctrine that was drilled into me. I did not even get a puberty chat. I returned home thinking that I was dying, and it was awkward to speak to people about because I was dying through my unmentionables, and then I got told, ‘Oh no, you’ve got your period’. But I did not get the puberty chat; I got ‘Now it’s really important to keep yourself pure for your future husband.’ And it was talked about how I was for my future husband now and not to let certain things happen, not to get emotionally attached and all of these things, and submit my feelings about boys to Dad. And I probably got away with more than most because I was a Heath, but I was too scared of eternal damnation, of humiliation, exposure or lifelong heartbreak if I was to step outside of this. This is something that every survivor has told me about.

I have also heard from survivors who were raped, who then told my mum and dad about that rape and were told that they cannot have an abortion if there is a product of rape and that they cannot report that to the police, because ‘We don’t trust the government of man, we trust the government of God’ – more than one occasion.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Thank you so much for the enormous amount of work that you have so professionally put into this inquiry as well. I might actually ask these questions on notice if that is okay, with time and I know that other people are heading off, but I want them on the record. You mentioned earlier that there are cults that have been receiving government funding but were not necessarily specific about what cults they were and what funding they received. Is there something, could you guide us with some of that information if possible? 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. And just finally, the loaded one, what recommendations do you believe would have the greatest immediate impact for survivors, and are there are barriers to implementation? I got four in; everyone else only got one.

**Clare HEATH-McIVOR:** That is fine. Pop the questions on notice, and I am more than happy to answer them. I will say an important thing to note right now is that we specifically, in the *Beyond Belief* white paper, did not advocate for – in fact cautioned against – a public list of cults. It is not for government, unless the harm is egregious and well known, like with Shincheonji – I think government has the responsibility to say, ‘Public health warning: Shincheonji has been exposed as a cult.’ And Japan recently did this; I think it was with the Moonies. There was enough concern to go, ‘This group is a cult.’ In *Beyond Belief* we have suggested a tiered response where at the bottom we have got the research and education and the public health messaging around healthy community and around non-coercive behaviours. Then the next level up needs to be the civil responses, the compliance notices, the way that we can work with organisations to reduce the structural risks. Then right up the top we should have the significant harm.

The thing about the legitimacy shields that are used by cults is that cults will front as normal organisations. It is only when you dig behind it that you go, ‘Oh, there’s some really significant harm here.’ The law needs to be about group-based coercive control, and it needs to be about recognising these legitimacy shields. Religious freedom is not the freedom to defraud, exploit, abuse or deceive. We cannot easily say, ‘That’s a cult; let’s black-ban them.’ What we need to do is do our footwork, have that independent monitor and have that commission that can say, ‘Actually we’ve got some concerning intel on this group. Maybe let’s not give them the grants’ or ‘Maybe let’s work with a coaching organisation or the independent commission to try to reduce the structural weaknesses.’ It is a really complex problem, and we are never going to be able to go, ‘Okay, we’ve listed every cult,’ because behaviours can morph over time. You might have some unhealthy dynamics that emerge in a workplace or a yoga club or something like that, but then you can change the leadership over and restore that to being a healthy organisation.

I think at the heart of it all what we want is to foster knowledge about what healthy, noncoercive community looks like and what is completely unacceptable in any setting, no matter what the belief is. SOCCHG is working on frontline services. We need to be doing that training, but we definitely need that independent monitor and we definitely need laws around group-based coercive control – that is, coercive control that occurs in a group setting.

**The CHAIR:** Great. We will wrap it up there. Clare, thank you so much for appearing before the committee today and for your contribution to this inquiry. The committee greatly appreciates the time and effort that you have taken to prepare your evidence and acknowledges the significance of your testimony. 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 declare this meeting adjourned.

**Committee adjourned.**