

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other organisations

Bendigo — 14 March 2013

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Witness

Mr D. Miller.

The CHAIR — On behalf of the committee, I welcome Mr Dean Miller. Thank you for your willingness to appear before this hearing. All evidence taken by this committee is taken under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act, attracts parliamentary privilege and is protected from judicial review. Any comments made outside the precincts of the hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege. This hearing today is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript. Following your presentation, committee members will ask questions relating to both your oral evidence and the submission you have supplied to us, and we thank you again for being before us.

Mr MILLER — First of all I commend the government for establishing this parliamentary inquiry and I thank the committee for allowing me the opportunity to speak today. I would like to talk about an organisation called the Geelong Revival Centre. It is an organisation that my mother joined in about 1970 when I was two years of age, and I stayed in that organisation until I was 31 years of age. I have never held an office in that organisation, but I do know the intimate workings of it, having spent, I guess, all of my upbringing in that church. I will just talk about the church to colour the pallet a little, to give the committee an idea of the sort of organisation we are talking about.

The organisation [**In accordance with the procedures observed by Parliamentary Committees when dealing with witnesses, as stated in the *Guidelines for the Rights and Responsibilities of Witnesses*, a section has been expunged from this place in the transcript – future reference to ‘text expunged’**]. was established in the mid to late 1950s down in Geelong. The organisation has around 20 Australia-wide affiliated organisations, but it is run out of Geelong. There are about another 20 affiliated churches in different parts of the world. The organisation despises theology. They despise theologians. They do not believe you can be taught the word of God. They believe in a personal experience with God. That is what they believe. They believe in faith healing, and they pooh-pooh the medical profession as a result of their belief that God will heal all of your sicknesses and ailments.

[text expunged, see above].

The organisation does not have any committees as far as I know. I never once saw a financial set of accounts. I do not believe there is a constitution or anything like that.

There is a set of guidelines, and I will just very quickly read out a couple of these guidelines just to give the committee an idea. These guidelines are attached to a noticeboard at the back of the hall. I will just read some of these out at random: no visiting of new members or accepting of invitations to visit new members without first checking with pastor; no private meeting for prayer or for getting around the word — the Bible — to be arranged or held without first checking with the pastor; no literature, including full gospel literature, other than literature available at the assembly book stall to be brought into the assembly or passed between members without first checking with pastor; never criticise one assembly member to another; doctrines from other assemblies not to be debated or criticised; no young boy or girl to be encouraged in a romantic affair until at least nine months saved — they talk about the saved and the unsaved; young people who desire to pair off must notify pastor.

You get a sense that this is a very controlling organisation. They control every aspect of your life: where you can and cannot work, the distance from Geelong, who you can and cannot invite to your wedding, and that sort of thing. They just control every aspect of your life. One of the ways they exercise control is to ban members of the congregation from having anything to do with ex-members, whether they were excommunicated — or, in their words, ‘put out of fellowship’ — or whether they left of their own accord. You are to have nothing to do with those people, and they are labelled as ‘backsliders’. That just paints the picture.

[text expunged, see above].

I would like to now talk about four different areas of abuse I have seen and experienced myself personally from the Geelong Revival Centre. I have categorised these as emotional abuse, spiritual abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse. The Geelong Revival Centre has a practice of not notifying the police when they become aware of criminal abuse. They try to keep abuse quiet at all costs because their reputation, or what they call the testimony, is paramount to their existence.

The CHAIR — Mr Miller, can I just interrupt you at this point. As Chair, I remind you and formally advise you and members of the media and public gallery that pending a review and publication of the Hansard

transcript all reporting of your evidence will be suppressed pending further notice and order of the committee. I just caution you on — —

Mr MILLER — Yes, sure. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Mr MILLER — The examples of children being abused in the church are just swept under the carpet, and the practice of the church is to do what they call ‘putting people out of fellowship’. You are kicked out of the church, and nothing more is done about it. There are no investigations and no inquiries — nothing — because they preach that God will protect church members from harm and from evil, so when that happens to people in the church it brings a bad testimony on the church. They pretend it does not exist, more or less.

Victims of abuse in the Geelong Revival Centre are further victimised and they are blamed. The words the church uses are, ‘You weren’t walking in the spirit’ or ‘You weren’t walking right with the Lord’. So the blame is put right back on the victim, that somehow their spiritual life was not good enough and therefore bad things happened to them. The church believes it is okay for other parents to administer corporal punishment on children who were not their own. I have seen that happen in my upbringing. A number of my times I myself got the strap from other people in the church without my mother being present.

As a child, my grandparents were in the church for only a short period of time when I was born — probably six months or so. We were brought up to believe our grandparents were backsliders — that they were evil sinners, that they had left the Lord and that, worse, they were going to rot in hell for eternal life for being backsliders. We were lucky to see our grandparents once a year. They only lived half an hour’s drive away, and therefore we were deprived — myself and my siblings — of any meaningful relationship with our grandparents. To me, that constitutes a form of abuse by denying me and my siblings the right to have a full relationship with the extended family. The same applies to my father. My mother labelled him a backslider, and I did not have any relationship with him. I do not recall him. He left my mum when I was two years of age, and I met him for the first time when I was 30 years of age. So I have missed out on a whole childhood and teenage years and young adulthood of any relationship with my father because of the preachings of the church that misguided my mother.

I would like to talk about physical abuse. GRC actively discourage anyone from seeking medical support because they renounce the medical profession. They believe God will meet all of your needs and heal you, and if you have suffered from an illness or an ailment and you do not do what they call ‘seeing the victory’ on that — in other words, get healed of it — they again put the blame on you and say, ‘You are not walking right with the Lord, because you should be healed’. When you are not, they blame you.

As a child I grew up with chronic, severe migraine headaches. Not once did my mother ever take me to a doctor for that. I recall lying in bed for days at a time in the most excruciating agony, with migraine. Mum would administer Panadol or aspirin — that was it — and that did not do anything. It was not until I was 18 years of age that I myself sought medical attention. Now, in my adult life, I can control those migraines. I could tell the committee every single time I had a migraine as a child where I was, what I was doing and who was there. They were so bad, and I got no medical support because the church actively discouraged it. To me that is a form of child abuse.

When I was about 15 or 16 years of age my mother, bringing up myself and my siblings on her own, sought help from the church and the elders. There was a particular time when one of the elders of the church — he is still an elder, in his 80s — came over to the home to give me a stern talking to. I probably deserved it at the time; I would not deny that. But out of nowhere I was hit with a severe blow to my face and I was knocked to the floor of the lounge room unconscious for a short period of time. My mother did not see that occur, but she knows about it. It was never reported. It was more or less accepted that it was an acceptable thing to do to a young teenager. At my wedding five years later the same elder spoke, and he made a bit of a joke about that incident, which I did not appreciate at the time.

Sometime after that assault there was an occasion where I woke up in the middle of the night from a dream that this particular elder was after me and chasing me. I actually jumped out of the bedroom window. I grabbed one of my sister’s bikes — it had two punctured tyres — and I rode that, clunk, clunk, down the footpath a block away to the North Shore railway station. It was a freezing cold night. I finally came to my senses and woke up, for want of a better word, and walked back home. It was probably 2 o’clock or 3 o’clock in the morning, and

Mum heard me banging on the back door and let me in. That was the effect that that assault had on me in my later years.

Because of time I will just leave some of this out. In relation to sexual abuse I am aware of at least five people, some closer to me than others, who have experienced sexual abuse within the church and sexual abuse outside of the church, but the whole time it has been covered up. One person I know was digitally raped at a church outing at Queenscliff as a teenager by a then Sunday school teacher. This girl, who is now a grown adult, has never reported it to the police. She did not report it while she was in the church for fear of being made to be the victim, because of the shame of it and because nothing would be done about it. Later the perpetrator of the crime, still a Sunday school teacher, went on to abuse at least one other teenage girl in the church. When that was brought to the pastor's attention the school teacher was put at a fellowship. There was no reporting to the police — nothing. He was just disposed of. The girl was made to feel like she was a liar as well, and that she was making all of this up.

[text expunged, see page 2].

I am aware of a case in the 1950s where a young girl was brought up by foster parents in the Geelong Revival Centre. She was regularly sexually interfered with by her foster father. When that was brought to the attention of the Geelong Revival Centre pastor, the mother and father were put at a fellowship, kicked out of the church, never to be seen again.

I know of other examples. I had a phone call this week from a father whose daughter, when she was younger, was questioned at length by the pastor of this church in relation to her sexual activities with her boyfriend. Her boyfriend raped her. As a result of that, the pastor tried to force her to marry her boyfriend. That did not happen because the parents did not allow it to happen. But the pastor of the church tried to effect that outcome in the church.

There are other examples involving teenagers. In this particular church sex before marriage is absolutely taboo, it is banned, and if you get caught doing that you are out, probably never to be admitted back into the church. If there are allegations of teenagers involving themselves in sexual relationships with each other, the questioning of those teenagers by the pastor is absolutely highly inappropriate. That is between the teenagers and their parents. It is nothing to do with the church and its pastor. I had a phone call this week from a father whose teenage daughter was questioned absolutely appallingly. Intricate details and questions were asked about that sexual event. To me, that is an abuse of authority and an abuse of the trust that those kids place in the pastor.

I will just say a couple of other things in closing. There are no working-with-children checks within the Geelong Revival Centre. They just would not believe in them at all. They try to get away with anything they can. They were reported to DHS a number of years ago about their childminding centres. They did not comply with regulations. They were dragged kicking and screaming to change their ways. At the moment when there is a church meeting or when there is Sunday school, the littlies who are too young to go to Sunday school are cared for by groups of parents — no more than five or six children at a time to meet the DHS regulations — but none of those people would have working-with-children checks or anything of the sort. The Sunday school teachers certainly would not. I myself have had anonymous personal threats made against me when it became known in Geelong that I raised this as an issue for the inquiry that former or current members of the Geelong Revival Centre should consider contributing to. I am the CEO of a public sector organisation, and there was a veiled threat made to me, 'You'd better shut up, Dean, or we might say some things about you'. It was a veiled threat to ruin my public sector career. That is probably all I would like to say at the moment.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Dean, for sharing your story. I remind you that the committee is not examining individual cases and will refer your allegations on to the police.

Mr McGUIRE — Thank you, Dean, for your testimony. What would be your advice to this committee? You were saying there was no reporting to police and that, 'Don't bring bad testimony on the church' is the view. It is a culture of denial. What do you think should be implemented?

Mr MILLER — In this type of organisation there is no structure where there is any appeals process or anything like a normal church. There are no committees. There is just a group of elders in the church, and they are accountable to no-one. So it is more of a cult where there is just no accountability. They believe they are accountable to God and to nobody else. So you have a church outfit that has no qualifications and where there is

no oversight of the leadership. I think that is the problem. I do not know what the answer is. I think working-with-children checks would be a good start for anyone involved in churches who is having anything to do with children, whether it is during outings, Sunday school or childminding. I think that would be a useful thing to consider.

Mr McGuire — Mandatory reporting to police?

Mr Miller — Mandatory reporting to police, yes, most definitely.

Mr McGuire — External evaluation of what is going on?

Mr Miller — I believe that would be a useful improvement, and I think perhaps a review of the penalties for not reporting allegations would also be useful.

Mr McGuire — So that it is an offence if you do not report it — a concealment?

Mr Miller — Yes. In my opinion if you are aware of an allegation and there is some substance to it and you conceal it, you are almost as guilty as the perpetrator. That is just my opinion.

Mr O'Brien — Thank you, Dean, for coming forward. I should place on the record that you are known to me through professional work. I certainly appreciate your courage in coming forward for the reasons you have stated. I would like to ask you a couple of questions. Two aspects that you have identified in the group you have talked about, the Geelong Revival Centre, can perhaps be extended to other religions, and one is the dealing with those who desert, who are seen to desert or who leave the faith or who are seen as non-believers. There is an intolerance of them, which makes for difficulty. Secondly, regarding sexual relations or sexual taboos, if there has been a perceived breach, the religion deals with the embarrassment factor as a means to suppress.

I would like to ask you about them, but firstly I would also like to endorse the Chair's comments that if there is a failure to report crimes that have occurred, obviously it is not too late. That is very important to find out why investigative processes have been suppressed so that things can be investigated to understand that. Obviously I would encourage you or anyone else to embark upon that course. Can I just ask you to talk about that taboo aspect and perhaps that intolerance aspect and how it affects the culture of the organisation you are talking about before?

Mr Miller — Sure. So the first element of the question is around dealing with ex-members and that is central to the way this church operates, because that is the way it can maintain control over its membership. You are not allowed to marry outside of the church. You can marry other people within other branches of the same church. They call it the 'saved' and the 'unsaved'. You are not allowed to marry an unsaved person, in other words, someone who is not in the church. Therefore you have got this church that has built up since the 1950s, and there are probably 500 people in Geelong and probably about another 200 or 300 people Australia wide. So you have consequently built up a structure where a lot of people are intermarried and related to each other, and your best friends are in the church. For example, in my situation, I was kicked out of the church when I was 31 because my marriage ended. I was blamed for that, therefore I was not a good husband and therefore 'See you later. You're out of the church. You weren't walking right with the Lord'. Most of my best friends were in the church and for a period of five or six years I found it very difficult, having grown up in the church, to be suddenly out there in the world on my own. It sounds ridiculous, but that is a very difficult thing for people to come to grips with.

That is the grip they have on people. People feel they are tied, because if they leave the church of their own accord or speak up against it, knowing that they are going to be kicked out by questioning anything that is done at the church, they know they will be ostracised from their family, their extended family and their best friends. That really is a powerful incentive for them to not say anything and to not question.

In relation to the sexual aspects, the church labels teenagers who have sex before marriage as 'fornicators'; if you are a married person, you will be labelled an 'adulterer'. They have tightened up on this in the church. Probably back in the 1980s when I was in my teens, if you had had sex before marriage, you would have been put out of the fellowship for nine months and then you would be allowed back in the church. But the shame of those young people when they came back into the church was so humiliating to them because of the stigma of having been kicked out of the church and being out on your own for nine months. Now they have tightened up.

They almost do not let you back if you have sex before marriage. Again it is a very strict set of rules around sexual relationships.

Mr O'BRIEN — Could you just tie that back to our terms of reference in relation to the culture of suppressing reporting? Could you give any examples that you identified to specifically outline how that culture would inhibit people, particularly victims and those who are concerned about victims, from coming forward?

Mr MILLER — I think you have sort of answered the question yourself, Mr O'Brien. I will give you an example of the lady that I know and there could be other examples; the examples I have given today are just the tip of the iceberg. If you are sexually abused in the church, whether it is by your boyfriend or by somebody else, because of the stigma associated with that and the fact that you are made to be the victim — 'You shouldn't have put yourself in that position. You weren't walking right with God. You weren't obeying the assembly rules' and that sort of thing — the young people are very, very reluctant to speak to the pastor or even their parents. They will hold it within themselves, and it is not until the parents find out that there is something strange going on with their kids and start to have conversations with their kids that some of these events are brought to light. The children know that if they report it, they ultimately probably will not be in the church for much longer either, and that is a very hard thing for them — —

Mr O'BRIEN — There is also the embarrassment factor or taboo factor that the church has then in terms of its own reputation.

Mr MILLER — That is a huge factor, and when I was in the church if you were kicked out of the church for any form of sexual abuse, you were named from the pulpit. You were named, and there is enormous stigma. These people, having left the church, would walk along the street and other church members, who had been very, very good friends or had been brought up with them, would just look the other way. It is just an appalling situation that they have been allowed to get away with for so long.

Ms HALFPENNY — Thanks. I think you mentioned that you had had a call from a father. Is this a sort of a group of people who have previously been members? What are this group and yourself looking for in terms of the organisation and what this committee recommends? Is it about changing the culture? Is it about making sure that people are criminally liable if there are certain abuses against children? What do you see as the — —

Mr MILLER — Yes. I think given the culture of that organisation it would be nigh impossible to change. [text expunged, see page 2].

I cannot see the culture changing. I can see the only way that these matters that I have identified, and similar, can be addressed is through legislation — through legislative reform — to, again, make people accountable and to make people that are in positions of trust and authority responsible. They are in a huge position of trust. [text expunged, see page 2].

Forget about the testimony of the Geelong Revival Centre. Things in any religion happen. No matter how much you aspire to be a truly moral, righteous organisation, you cannot control the behaviour of individual people, so there is no point suppressing that and pretending it does not exist. That is the culture, 'Just pretend it does not exist'. I think that has got to change and people need to be held accountable. As I said before, there are no qualifications to be a pastor of that church. There is no training, there is no theology and in fact they despise that. They just make it up themselves. I do not know what form of registration there needs to be of churches and whether that is an answer. Some of these cults have existed — —

Mr O'BRIEN — Do you definitely believe there is role for the state to intervene in these situations?

Mr MILLER — I do. Yes, I strongly do believe that.

Mr O'BRIEN — If you can think of any more specific legislative changes, please let us know and provide them in due course.

Mr MILLER — Sure.

The CHAIR — Dean, thank you very much for your evidence this afternoon. It has been most helpful, so on behalf of the committee we do appreciate your time. Thank you again.

Mr MILLER — Thanks for the opportunity. Good luck with your deliberations.

Witness withdrew.

The CHAIR — That concludes the public hearing session, so I will ask the public to please leave the public gallery. Thank you.