Submission No 273

# INQUIRY INTO THE RECRUITMENT METHODS AND IMPACTS OF CULTS AND ORGANISED FRINGE GROUPS

Name: Name withheld

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# Name withheld

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

By OKH Male, 50, Northern Suburbs of Melbourne, Immigrant parents.

# **Main Point of Submission**

The submission is focussed on changing OH&S laws to recognize street preachers, door to door proselytizers, or people engaged in any other form of recruiting or proselytizing for a specific organization as volunteers under the OH&S acts and giving them the same care and protections.

I request that the Inquiry consider legislative changes to ensure that individuals who volunteer (whether freely or under coercion) to proselytise (meaning: preaching, evangelizing, persuading, cajoling, converting) or recruit in public on behalf of religious or other organisations are afforded the same protections and duty of care as employees and volunteers in other sectors. In particular, such individuals should be entitled to mental health support and debriefing after distressing incidents, similar to the protections that already exist in other areas of employment and volunteer service.

# **Background and Rationale**

- Whenever publicly proselytizing or recruiting for religious or fringe groups, the chance of
  confrontation and stressful interaction is greater than other public activities due to the
  direct targeting of the prospective convert and the nature of the subject. Even low-level
  aggression experienced many times over time can have high levels of mental health
  impact.
- As an employee at and later as a volunteer with the I was required to undergo mental health debriefs and had further support available after confronting or traumatic incidents.
- This kind of care and support is what I am seeking to extend to volunteers who engage in
  proselytising or recruitment activities in public, whether that be door to door, handing
  out pamphlets, street preaching, or sitting beside a literature stand.

# **Appendices**

I am not legally trained but I am aware that such legislation already exists. These appendices compiled by ChatGPT are essential to the substance of my submission and to what I am asking

the Inquiry to address. The appendices explain which kind legislation I am referring to and how they need to be made to apply to volunteers engaged in public recruitment or proselytising.

- Appendix 1 &2: Legislation that applies to an employer's duty of care (compiled by ChatGPT).
- **Appendix 3**: Discussion of whether such protections extend to volunteer religious proselytisers or recruiters of other groups (also compiled by ChatGPT).

The Inquiry is asked to recommend that legislation be amended or introduced to ensure volunteers engaged in public recruitment or proselytising are legally protected and supported, in line with the duty of care currently provided in other sectors.

# **Personal Experience**

Though I was involved in the proselytizing work for at least 2 hours a weekend from the age 4 (four) (sometimes spending 20 hours in it during school holidays), as a young man I served the Watchtower Society as a Jehovah's Witness "pioneer," which required about 90 hours per month of door-to-door proselytising, selling literature, and soliciting donations. During this time, I encountered numerous hostile and distressing interactions:

- Sworn at and verbally abused.
- Doors slammed in my face.
- Ordered off properties in threatening circumstances.
- On one occasion in \_\_\_\_\_, Northcote, a resident set her dog on me; I had to use my bag to protect myself from its claws and teeth.
- In addition to the above incidents, constant rejection and microaggressions over the years impacted my mental health.

While my experiences were relatively mild compared to what some others endured, there were some instances as mentioned above where they were not and had a memorable impact on my mental health. There were also times when others in the team were confronted with stressful situations, even sexual abuse. No support, no debriefing, and no mental health care was offered afterwards — only an expectation to continue "business as usual."

# **Recruiting Methods of Jehovah's Witnesses**

# "Volunteer"-Based System

The majority of recruiting is done by volunteers who are unpaid and cover all their own expenses, including transport, clothing, footwear, satchels, and even the literature stands often used today. Some leaders at the circuit level upwards (in charge of 15-20 congregations of approximately 100 people) have their immediate needs and expenses met. Technically they are all volunteers but they are coerced into doing at least some proselytizing work, it is expected of every Jehovah's Witness, even those at the top of the organization (reportedly). It is important to realize that, deep down at some level, most of these people believe they have to do this work to be saved from death at the end of the world (Ezekiel 3:18,19; 33: 8,9; 2 Timothy 4:2).

### **Introduction to Recruitment**

Shortly before and after baptism, new members are introduced to door-to-door recruiting. This is organized at the local congregation level and involves knocking on doors to sell Watchtower Bible and Tract Society literature, effectively repeating the process the recruit experienced themselves.

# **Meetings and Reporting**

- Members attend two weekly meetings: two two-hour meetings at the Kingdom Hall. One
  of the two-hour meetings is devoted entirely to training in proselytizing.
- Attendance is heavily stressed, as is participation in door-to-door work.
- A "publisher's" spiritual health is measured by monthly reports detailing hours spent proselytizing, literature distributed, return visits, and Bible studies conducted.
- Average monthly recruitment work in Australia is 10–11 hours across members, including working adults, retirees, and children.
- Status within the organization, and even perceived salvation, is tied to recruitment activity. Promotions also depend on maintaining a "healthy" monthly report.
- Although detailed monthly reports were discontinued in October last year, members still indicate whether they recruited each month.

# **Recruiting Process**

- Door-to-Door Work: Australia is divided into parcels with blocks assigned to small teams. Each morning begins with a brief meeting to assign areas and partners.
   Volunteers knock on doors, offer literature, and record responses.
- 2. The work usually starts with a brief meeting where the publishers are paired off and the meeting point at the area to be canvassed is decided on. Members are paired off despite their age and maturity levels.<sup>1</sup>
- 3. Follow-Up: If someone shows interest, short notes are taken and a return visit is planned to offer further literature or discussion.
- 4. Bible Studies: Interested individuals are invited to engage in a "Bible study" in their own homes, which primarily teaches Watchtower doctrines. The publisher who contacted them often conducts these studies, sometimes with a partner.
- 5. Integration: These interested individuals are soon invited to meetings and conventions, often experiencing strong social reinforcement from other members (love bombing).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Usually, males with males and females with females, but if there is an imbalance then a male can work with a female. Old and young are often paired together. It is up to the leader to decide the pairing off and it can or cannot be done with consideration of mental health and other issues in mind. Though a young man (16-early 20s) I was often paired with older women, some who suffered from schizophrenia and depression or other social impairments, after spending two hours or more door knocking and in "conversation" in between doors with these people, I would feel depressed and very stressed. I did this 3-4 days a week. **Does OH&S legislation cover this kind of mismanagement and risk to mental health?** 

- 6. Recruitment Encouragement: After attending regularly and understanding JW beliefs, individuals are encouraged to participate in recruiting themselves, ultimately leading to baptism.
- 7. Timeline: The entire process, from first contact to baptism, typically spans 18 months to 3 years, with continued guidance for six months post-baptism.

#### **Pioneers**

- Some members committed 60, 90, or 120 (now 50 or 90) hours per month as "pioneers," a form of special service.
- Weekly meetings and yearly conventions strongly encourage members to aspire to pioneering, often linked to scriptural ideas of giving one's best years to Jehovah and the imminence of Armageddon.

This entire work, going on 7 days a week all over Australia by, engaged in at least in some form for 2-10 hours a month by 30,000+ members is **highly organized and is ultimately centrally controlled by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, with it's headquarters outside**, at which hundreds of volunteers live and work full time (including Saturday mornings). It is not just some zealous members deciding to go out and make converts off their own bat.

# **Worldview and Lifestyle Control**

- Members were taught that the generation who witnessed 1914 would see Armageddon, leading to discouragement of higher education, career planning, property ownership, and long-term financial commitments, even marriage.
- Participation in clubs or extracurricular school activities is discouraged.
- Recruitment and service are emphasized as more important than old friendships or family relationships, which often become strained.

# **Impact on Social Relationships**

- Members are encouraged to prioritize service to Jehovah over old friendships or family ties.
- Non-JWs are portrayed as destined for destruction at Armageddon, and along with the time requirements of the active JW life this reinforces separation from previous social networks.

# **Modern Adjustments**

- While door-to-door work remains primary, less emphasis is now placed on it as the initial point of contact. Other methods include literature stands ("cart witnessing"), letters, phone calls, and conversations with colleagues.
- The follow-up process, Bible studies, social integration, and recruitment expectations remain largely unchanged.
- Though Jehovah's Witnesses no longer believe that the generation that saw 1914 will see Armageddon, the same urgency and belief that the end of this world is within a few years is kept through other teaching and reasoning.

# Leaving the organisation

When someone leaves the Jehovah's Witnesses (disassociates) or is expelled (disfellowshipped), they are shunned. Until recently, active members were repeatedly instructed not to speak to former Witnesses—not even to greet them on the street. This applies even if the person is a minor, and in recent years some Jehovah's Witnesses have been getting "baptized" as young as 8. There are reports of former baptized Jehovah's Witnesses as young as 11 being shunned. If they are related to a Jehovah's Witness family and live in the family home, they are usually allowed to live there until they are 18 but must then move out and all communication ceases. Whilst in the house communication can only be regarding essential matters regarding living arrangements and general running of a household.

A few months ago, this policy was relaxed slightly, allowing brief greetings or small talk to exmembers if the member felt comfortable doing this. This was as a response to Norway putting pressure on the organization to stop shunning, especially minors. Belgium has also begun to put such pressure on them. These cases can be researched on the internet.

Because ex-members often have few remaining friends and strained family relationships (those who grew up in the organization, like myself, have no other friends), leaving the organization typically results in significant social isolation. Many are also unfamiliar with social spaces such as clubs, pubs, or evening classes, and retain the belief—instilled over years—that "the world" is dangerous or morally corrupt. This combination often leaves former Witnesses socially isolated and unsure how to integrate into broader society.

# My background - my mother as a case study

When I was three years old, my mother was recovering at home from three operations and had been off work for six months. Jehovah's Witnesses came to her door and offered a "free Bible study," which she accepted. The study used the Watchtower publication *The Truth That Leads to Eternal Life* (published by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society).

This was effectively a bait-and-switch: the study was not a neutral Bible study but a controlled teaching program presenting exclusively Jehovah's Witness doctrine, using selected and often misapplied scripture. My mother, an immigrant with only a grade 3 education but a strong love of the Christian God, was quickly converted.

# She was taught that:

- The Jehovah's Witnesses were God's instrument on earth.
- True scriptural understanding could only be gained through the Society.
- Salvation at Armageddon required association with Jehovah's Witnesses and full acceptance of their teachings.
- The Governing Body, a group of men directing the Watchtower Society, were Jehovah's Witnesses and therefore God's legal representatives on Earth.

Within six months, she was baptized. Before the baptism, she publicly affirmed two questions:

- **1** "Have you repented of your sins, dedicated yourself to Jehovah, and accepted his way of salvation through Jesus Christ?"<sup>2</sup>
- **2** "Do you understand that your baptism identifies you as one of Jehovah's Witnesses in association with Jehovah's organization?"

I was four years old at the time, and my siblings and I became involved in all related activities, including recruitment work alongside my mother and other members as I got a bit older – about 8 years old and onwards.

# **Personal Impact**

Below is a brief and much abridged account of how I was affected by the recruitment methods of the Jehovah's Witnesses. The backstory about my mother illustrates how these systems operate and impact families. While I have focused on key experiences, other former Witnesses' submissions will likely be similar; a complete account of my experiences would exceed 50 pages. Online communities, such as r/exjw, and numerous websites and YouTube channels document similar experiences.

From ages 16 to 21, I worked as a volunteer Jehovah's Witness proselytizer, a "pioneer," committing 90 hours a month to this work at my own expense while supporting myself through part-time jobs. I left school early (aged 16) to dedicate as many years as possible to this work, believing—based on the group's teaching—that Armageddon was imminent.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> These questions have evolved over time to reflect doctrinal developments within the organization. For example, earlier versions included references to the holy spirit or described the organization as "God's spirit-directed organization."

I eventually burned out and could no longer maintain pioneer-level hours, though I continued proselytizing 6–12 hours per month until age 29. As a result of the incidents and chronic rejection, between ages 19 and 29 I experienced repeated periods of depression, sometimes lasting a year or more, and even suicidal thoughts. I continue to have depressive periods but have learned to manage them with and without medication. I had a deeply held negative opinion of people in general, in line with the Jehovah's Witness teaching that "the world is controlled by Satan" and that "people in the world are bad people, and if you don't think they are bad, then you don't know them well enough". I struggled with this for many years, preferring a worldview where society is controlled by an elite few and is out to enslave me (often referred to as conspiracy theories). In the past few years I have been able to have a much more positive and healthy view of society.

My limited education and work experience left me struggling to find stable employment. I spent years intermittently on JobSeeker payments and have lived in low economic circumstances and am currently on government income support. Even now, doing occasional work in garden maintenance, I find it difficult to charge a fair rate for my labour, reflecting a lingering mental block to charging for work.

When I left the Jehovah's Witnesses at age 29, I was strongly shunned by all members, including lifelong friends and my support network. My mother alternated between soft and hard shunning. My situation improved somewhat after marrying someone who had never been a JW and having children, which allowed my mother to have a relationship indirectly with me as part of a relationship with them.

# **Boundaries**

There are many definitions and traits of cults. I have found the most useful to be "high-control-groups". Basically, because of the position they have in your life (leader, God's representatives, etc.) healthy personal and societal boundaries can be ignored, as they are the boundary keepers, or they are ones that gave you everything and so they own everything you have, and in the case of equating themselves with God, this includes your life (same goes for the representative of the leader/god). So no area of your life is out of bounds, including what you do to earn a living, what you do with your income, what you do with your time, what you do in the bedroom, what you eat, whether you smoke or drink, what you wear, what you read, watch or listen to, nor do you have a right to any privacy when it comes to any of these areas that they believe they have ownership of.

With this in mind, Jehovah's Witnesses don't physically isolate you in a compound or farm far away from family and friends but they get you do it to yourself by constantly reminding you (in the 4 hours a week of meetings and their literature which you are required to read and study) that Jehovah God should be your primary concern as all others and this world are going to die. They don't make you cut your internet connection, get rid of your television or take your radio out of the car, but they make you control and severely censor what you read, watch or listen to, by constantly reminding you that the world is evil and Satan has a personal assignment to get you to stop being a Jehovah's Witness and you will then die at Armageddon

Jehovah's Witnesses create and us and them mentality, they refer to non-JWs as "the world" and the words are said with the same intonation as "Satan" and is basically equivalized with the Devil. They teach that world is controlled by Satan, governments are controlled by Satan. On the other hand they elevate their organization to the status of God, and the name Jehovah is equivalent to the Watchtower Society, s when they say "give your best to Jehovah", or "give your youth to Jehovah", every publisher knows it means the Watchtower Society.

#### Conclusion

The submission is focussed on changing OH&S laws to recognize street preachers, door to door proselytizers, or people engaged in any other form of recruiting or proselytizing as volunteers under the OH&S acts and giving them the same care and protections.

I have progressed to a wider overview of how the Watchtower Society's work is organized, and then to selected personal details that may or may not have been covered in other submissions.

# Appendix 1

Here are the Victorian OHS Act provisions that cover psychological health (i.e., stress, mental health) — with the exact sections you can cite:

- **s5 Definitions:** The Act defines "health" to include psychological health. This means all duties that refer to "health" cover mental health, not just physical injury. (AustLII)
- s21 Duties of employers to employees: Primary duty to provide and maintain a working environment that is safe and without risks to health, so far as is reasonably practicable. Because "health" includes psychological health, this duty extends to preventing and managing psychosocial hazards (e.g., stress, bullying, workload). (Legislation Victoria)
- s22 Duties of employers to monitor health and conditions: Employers must monitor the health of employees and monitor workplace conditions—this encompasses psychological health and psychosocial risk factors. (Legislation Victoria)
- s35 Duty of employers to consult with employees: Employers must consult when identifying or assessing hazards/risks and when deciding on control measures—this includes psychosocial hazards and mental health risks. (Legislation Victoria)

Helpful official guidance (non-binding but practical):

 WorkSafe Victoria guidance clarifies that psychosocial hazards (things that can cause mental harm like stress) must be managed under the OHS Act duties above. (<u>WorkSafe Victoria</u>) **Appendix 2** - The duties of an employer to staff that have been in a stressful or confronting situation:

# **Legal Duties After an Incident**

# • s21 OHS Act (general duty):

The duty to provide a workplace that is safe and without risks to health continues **after an incident**. This means employers must take reasonable steps to minimise harm caused by the verbal assault.

# s22 OHS Act (monitoring):

Employers must **monitor the health of employees**—so they should check for psychological impact, stress, or trauma and act accordingly (e.g., follow-up support, referrals).

# • Incident response obligations (WorkSafe guidance):

Employers must **investigate the cause of the incident**, record it, and review whether current controls are adequate. If not, they must strengthen risk controls.

# **Practical Responsibilities to Staff**

WorkSafe Victoria and national guidance (e.g., Safe Work Australia's psychosocial hazards code) highlight these steps:

# 1. Immediate Safety and Support

- Remove the employee from danger (e.g., away from the aggressive customer).
- o Provide a safe space to recover immediately after the incident.
- Ensure the staff member does not feel pressured to continue working if distressed.

# 2. Debrief and Incident Reporting

- o Conduct a supportive debrief (not blaming) with the employee.
- o Record the incident in the workplace reporting system.
- Notify WorkSafe if the aggression constitutes a notifiable incident (e.g., serious threat, risk to life, or if someone required medical treatment).

# 3. Psychological Health Monitoring

- o Check in on the employee in the hours/days following.
- o Offer access to Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) or counselling.
- Adjust work duties if the worker is shaken (temporary redeployment or reduced customer contact).

# 4. Preventive Review

- o Review whether the controls in place were adequate.
- o Consult with staff (s35) on how to better prevent future incidents.
- o Implement stronger controls if needed (e.g., more staff on shifts, security presence, signage warning customers against abusive behaviour).

# Why it Matters Legally

Failing to support an employee after verbal assault may breach the duty of care under **s21 and s22**, because:

- Ongoing exposure to unaddressed stress or trauma = risk to psychological health.
- Ignoring post-incident support could leave the employer liable for workers' compensation claims for psychological injury.

# In short:

After an incident, employers must protect, support, and monitor the affected employee, investigate what happened, and review controls to stop recurrence.

<u>Appendix 3</u> - Are Jehovah's Wittiness proselytizers and fringe group recruiters covered by the existing legislation?

in Victoria this depends on the legal status of the volunteer and the capacity in which they're working.

# 1. Under the OHS Act 2004 (Vic)

- The OHS Act imposes duties on "employers" to their "employees."
- A *volunteer* is generally **not legally classified as an "employee"** unless there's an employment contract or payment involved.

#### However:

- s23 (Duties relating to persons other than employees): Employers (and selfemployed persons) must ensure, so far as reasonably practicable, that other people (including volunteers, customers, visitors) are not exposed to risks to their health or safety from the way work is carried out.
- This means that even if volunteers are not employees, the organisation still has a general duty of care to protect them from harm, including psychological harm from verbal abuse or aggression.

# 2. WorkSafe Victoria Guidance

- WorkSafe consistently treats volunteers, contractors, labour hire workers, and students on placement as persons to whom duty holders owe obligations.
- Organisations must provide a safe working environment for volunteers that covers:
  - o Training in handling aggression.
  - o Systems for incident reporting.
  - $\circ\quad$  Support and debriefing if they experience verbal as sault.

# 3. Practical Implication

- **Employees:** covered directly under **s21** and **s22** ongoing monitoring, health protection, and support after incidents.
- **Volunteers:** covered under **s23** organisations must still ensure their health and safety (including psychological safety), but the exact obligations (like workers' comp entitlements) may differ.
- Many organisations go beyond the legal minimum and apply the same post-incident procedures for volunteers as for employees, to ensure fairness, morale, and risk management.

# **Bottom line:**

Yes — the duty to protect volunteers from verbal assault and to respond after incidents does apply, but it arises under **s23** (duties to non-employees) rather than the employer–employee provisions. Practically, the organisation should support volunteers the same way it would employees (safe removal, debrief, counselling support, review of systems).

Here's a **side-by-side comparison** of an organisation's responsibilities after a **verbal assault or customer aggression incident**, showing where the law applies differently for **employees** vs **volunteers** in Victoria under the *OHS Act 2004 (Vic)*:

# Post-Incident Responsibilities: Employees vs Volunteers

Responsibility	Employees (covered under s21, s22, s35)	Volunteers (covered under s23)
Immediate safety	Must remove the worker from danger, ensure safe environment.	Same duty: organisation must not expose volunteers to risks to health/safety from the way work is conducted.

Incident reporting Incident ripudity under s22, but s23 requires the organisation to prevent risk to volunteers' health, which implies checking in and offering support.  Incident risk to volunteers' health, which implies s2 reporting the organisation to prevent risk to volunteers' health, which implies checking in and offering support.  Incident reporting Incident reporti	Responsibility	Employees (covered under s21, s22, s35)	Volunteers (covered under s23)
Health monitoring (psychological)       employees' health (s22) — includes psychological impacts.       s23 requires the organisation to prevent risk to volunteers' health, which implies checking in and offering support.         Support after incident       Access to debriefing, counselling (e.g. EAP), adjustments to work duties if required.       Best practice is to extend the same support (debrief, counselling access). Not a strict legal requirement but falls under "reasonably practicable" duty of care.         Consultation       Employer must consult with employees and HSRs about hazards and risk controls (s35).       Not a legal requirement, but consulting volunteers about hazards is strongly recommended for safety and risk management.         Workers' entitlements to WorkCover if they suffer a psychological compensation       Volunteers are not covered by WorkCover, unless a special arrangement exists. Organisation may	Incident reporting	investigate, and review risk controls. Some incidents may	should be reported and investigated to
Support after incidentcounselling (e.g. EAP), adjustments to work duties if required.support (debrief, counselling access). Not a strict legal requirement but falls under "reasonably practicable" duty of care.ConsultationEmployer must consult with employees and HSRs about hazards and risk controls (s35).Not a legal requirement, but consulting volunteers about hazards is strongly recommended for safety and risk management.Workers'Employees may have entitlements to WorkCover if they suffer a psychologicalVolunteers are not covered by WorkCover, unless a special arrangement exists. Organisation may	_	employees' health (s22) — includes psychological	s23 requires the organisation to prevent risk to volunteers' health, which implies
Consultation  Employees and HSRs about hazards and risk controls (s35).  Employees and HSRs about hazards is strongly recommended for safety and risk management.  Volunteers about hazards is strongly recommended for safety and risk management.  Volunteers are not covered by WorkCover, unless a special arrangement exists. Organisation may	• •	counselling (e.g. EAP), adjustments to work duties if	support (debrief, counselling access). Not a strict legal requirement but falls under
Workers' entitlements to WorkCover if  compensation they suffer a psychological they s	Consultation	employees and HSRs about	volunteers about hazards is strongly recommended for safety and risk
injury. need to offer internal support or insurance cover.	Workers' compensation	entitlements to WorkCover if they suffer a psychological	WorkCover, unless a special arrangement exists. Organisation may need to offer internal support or
System review  Employer must review and strengthen controls if needed (staffing, training, environment).  Same obligation under s23: organisation must ensure its operations do not pose risks to volunteers, so reviewing controls is required.	System review	strengthen controls if needed (staffing, training,	must ensure its operations do not pose risks to volunteers, so reviewing controls

# In summary:

- **Employees** are protected by the *stronger*, *specific duties* in s21, s22, and s35.
- **Volunteers** are protected by the **general duty of care under s23**, which is still enforceable but less prescriptive.
- Best practice = treat volunteers *the same way as employees* after an incident, even if not legally required, to ensure both compliance and good organisational culture.