

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Via email: em@aph.gov.au

Re: Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters Inquiry into the 2025 federal election from the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church

Dear Chair,

The Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (PBCC) is grateful for the opportunity to write this submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters.

Our church has been prompted to make this submission in part by the unprecedented assault which has been launched against us by members of Parliament including the [REDACTED], and the [REDACTED].

[REDACTED]'s comments

During the election campaign, on 29 April 2025, the [REDACTED] called our Church – a mainstream Christian Church which has been in this country for around 150 years – a “cult”. Then, while that was still reverberating across the airwaves, he took his election campaign to a primary school in Perth, outside which he launched an unprompted second attack on the Church, pondering: *“What is the quid pro quo (between the church and the [REDACTED] Party), given that that organisation doesn't vote in elections and given the views that they have?”*. There is some conjecture as to whether he repeated the cult statement as well that second day.

Regardless, that school is attended by five students from our Church, and the comments were so upsetting to them and their families that they had to be offered support. There are several hundred Plymouth Brethren Christian Church halls and meetings rooms in Australia, and we attend church multiple times per week. At most, if not all, of those meetings, those in attendance pray for our [REDACTED].

Third party support for PBCC

The attacks on the PBCC by the [REDACTED] prompted the well-respected senior Anglican leader, and Chairman of the Freedom for Faith Board Bishop [REDACTED] to say in response at the time:

"It is disappointing that the [REDACTED] has labelled the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church a "cult" and questioned the right of the members of the church to participate as volunteers in an Election. Freedom for faith means freedom of faith for all people, including those who support a different political party.

"The Plymouth Brethren are a mainstream Christian denomination. Members of that church have as much right as any other Australian to participate in the electoral process. I understand that some members of that church do not vote on religious grounds, exercising their right to conscientious objection. It is disappointing that this right has been weaponised against all members of the church.

"It is inappropriate for the [REDACTED] to question the motives of those who participate as volunteers by suggesting some other "quid pro quo", rather than recognising their participation as an exercise of their democratic right to support a party.

"It is also not appropriate for candidates to demand to know which church an election volunteer attends.

"In his speech yesterday the [REDACTED] stated that this was not the time for "a divisive debate about religion". Labelling a Christian denomination a sect and questioning their right to participate in elections creates this very division."

The Right Reverend [REDACTED]

Bishop of South Sydney

The concern is ongoing. [REDACTED], Chair of Crosslink Christian Network, an international network of Christian leaders, churches and ministries including 140 churches in Australia alone, has provided us with an additional statement which we include for consideration of the Committee. It is as follows:

Australia is a free country, where people quite rightly expect to be able to practice their religion free from persecution, discrimination, name-calling or anything of that nature.

No one would dare attack cohorts of the Jewish or Muslim communities for specific religious practices which are conducted entirely in line with their beliefs and the bounds of the law, and that same respect should be given to all Christian denominations.

This is why we are very concerned about the recent treatment of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church in some sections of politics and the media.

For some reason it has become OK to criticise Brethren parishioners for their eating and socialising practices; to question whether they should be allowed to participate in democratic elections; or to take issue with their (some would say conventional, others would disagree) interpretations of the Bible. None of this is OK.

Australia is the country of the fair go. It is a country where people can believe or not believe whatever we like but still get on with each other, and that extends to people of faith or no faith, not just some; and to all Christians, not just some.

The second we start deciding that it is OK to persecute one section of the religious community, we are all in danger. This needs to stop now.

[REDACTED]

Chair

Crosslink Christian Network

Comments from other Members of Parliament

During the campaign, the [REDACTED], [REDACTED] said the involvement of members of our church “*felt like an assault on democracy*”. Imagine if he had said that about people who attend other Christian churches, or mosques or synagogues. The [REDACTED], [REDACTED] was even more critical, going as far as walking up to volunteers, filming them and asking, “*Are you a member of the Exclusive Brethren*”. We ask all members of the Committee to imagine the outcry if [REDACTED] had instead been asking “are you a Hindu person” or “are you a Jew?” There would be riots on the street.

Given the commentary from [REDACTED] when he was announced as the [REDACTED], and some of his other commentary since that time, we express our intense concern that this Committee will be able to consider our submission in an impartial and unbiased manner.

We also put on the record our offer to meet with any member of the Federal Parliament to engage in dialogue rather than simply forming judgements about us based on the false words of our harshest critics. We have already made a similar offer to the [REDACTED]

Our statement of facts

Notwithstanding the issues of impartiality highlighted above, we are using this submission to put the facts on the record including:

- What we believe in and don’t.
- What our church is, and what it is not.

- Insights from our parishioners about their experience during the election.
- How Parliament should protect freedom of religion and speech.

It follows that the principal Terms of Reference to which this submission relates are:

- Assessment and review of the purported increase in incidents of aggressive conduct, deliberate obstruction, and intimidating behaviour towards voters, political participants, volunteers, and Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) officials.
- Potential reform of safety and security arrangements, including consideration of the powers, processes, and capacity of the AEC to manage and address increasingly threatening or disruptive behaviour.
- The implementation and operation of the electoral reform passed by the 47th Parliament, particularly regarding the use of money or capital in the most recent election.
- Reforms to address the ongoing threats of interference in our electoral system, both foreign and domestic.

We hope that you will approach this submission with an open mind and give the issues which we have raised due consideration.

We need to prevent future elections from descending into environments where people feel comfortable openly attacking others based on their religion or lack of religion. The discrimination we saw in April and May 2025 may have started with the Plymouth Brethren, but if left unchecked it certainly would not end with us.

Your sincerely



Director

Plymouth Brethren Christian Church

What we believe in and don't

The Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (PBCC) was founded around 200 years ago by John Nelson Darby, one of the most influential Protestant thinkers of the 19th century. Followers were concerned about the prevalence of hierarchy in protestant organisations and followed a path focussed instead on a direct relationship with God and each other.

Today, we have just over 55,000 members in our global Community, around 16,000 of whom live in Australia.

We refer to ourselves as the “Brethren” because we are a close tight-knit community of families held together by our shared Christian belief founded on the Holy Bible.

One of the main differences between our church and others is that we believe that sharing a meal with someone is an act of fellowship and we make a commitment to do that with those with which we would celebrate the Lord's Supper.

This does not mean we isolate ourselves from the world, nor do we consider ourselves above anyone else. We live and work harmoniously alongside all people from the wider community, regardless of their religion, their lifestyle, or their background.

The Church and our members are very aware of the exaggerated, biased or outright false commentary about us in the media, and how it has shaped the way we are viewed by those in the government and the wider community.

On that basis, we hope what follows is informative.

What our Church is, and what it is not

Noting the commentary over the election, including from some members of the Government and this Committee, we offer the following additional information to set the record straight. We would be grateful if this could be reflected in future discussions by the Committee but also more generally.

- Our church is not called the “Exclusive Brethren”. That term is not used by our church members nor our elders, only by people who are seeking to denigrate us. The correct name for our church is the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church.
- Our church is not a ‘cult’, an ‘extremist sect’, or anything else of that nature. The core tenets of our beliefs mirror those of many other Christians. We follow a normal Christian bible and the teachings therein. And we don't actively recruit members. As Anglican Bishop [REDACTED] said:

“The Plymouth Brethren are a mainstream Christian denomination. Members of that church have as much right as any other Australian to participate in the electoral process.”

- Women in our church are equal to men but also different, performing different roles. This includes:
 - They sit in a different row of seating, often with their young children. Similar practices can be seen in mosques and some Orthodox synagogues.
 - A man leads the conversation in the service. Many churches similarly reserve certain roles exclusively for men, for example with Catholic priests.
- And of course, our parishioners pay tax, and indeed follow all the laws of the land.

Key Insights from the 2025 Election

Based on the media commentary from [REDACTED], our church is being targeted by the Joint Standing committee on Electoral Matters. While the subsequent process may result in findings against us, we provide the following facts to inform your process.

1. Our church did not participate in the election nor coordinate the political involvement of those who did. But many of our parishioners did.

This response relates primarily to the following Term of Reference, however can be used to inform the Committee’s Report on others:

- *Reforms to address the ongoing threats of interference in our electoral system, both foreign and domestic.*

Everyone in Australia has the right to volunteer in elections irrespective of their religion, and that includes members of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church. While many members exercised this right in the 2025 election – this was an individual decision and nothing to do with our church.

To be completely clear – the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church does not campaign for, nor support, any political parties and did not organise or coordinate any volunteer efforts or any donation efforts of any type in any location.

This is not to say that members of our church did not participate – they did. And it’s not to say they weren’t coordinated – they clearly were. But this was not organised by the church. The actions of the church community are separate to the church.

The context for the Committee is as follows. Our church has around 16,000 members in Australia. For us, it is two things:

- First and foremost, we are a church. We attend local services together up to around seven times a week, where we worship the Lord, study the bible, sing hymns and do all the other things that would be instantly recognisable to other Christians around Australia and around the world.
- A secondary but still very strong part of us is community. Members of our church don't eat and drink with people from outside of our church, and tend to avoid things which would distract us from the Lord like movies and fictional books. In practice that means we are Christians who are strong in their faith, very close with each other and like working together.

This transpires very clearly in a strong interconnectedness and volunteering culture amongst our parishioners. This includes but is not limited to assisting our church charity, the Rapid Relief Team to serve meals to emergency responders combatting floods, fire and drought, with cash donations, cooking meals, and donating time and resources from businesses (such as trucks to move hay to farmers in need). It is also evidenced in the independent school system, OneSchool Global, where there is a strong culture of parishioners, particularly current and former parents, helping schools, running reading classes, serving at canteens and on Boards and the like.

So, considering this, if members of our church expressed to their network that they were volunteering, it is not a surprise that others would get involved. That is what happened here. There were senior members of our church who said that they would be volunteering at the election, and as traditional Christians and business owners it is not surprising that they predominantly supported [REDACTED] and other conservative causes (although we are aware that other parishioners supported [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] candidates as well).

What followed here was a strong showing of volunteers from members of our church. But to say that was organised by the church, would be wrong.

In any case, just as every other member of the Australian community has a right to freely exercise or not exercise their religion, and to freely participate or not participate in the political process, so do parishioners of PBCC.

On countless occasions in Australia, we have seen evidence of people who share the same faith tradition banding together for a common cause which often expresses itself in political action. Those individuals have their political freedom protected in the constitution and are free to organise and associate how they please. The same applies to our parishioners.

That the [REDACTED] chose to exclusively single out our church and not any other group or person based on their faith suggests a very political motive.

2. Our church did not donate to, or organise donations to, any political candidate or political parties.

This response relates primarily to the following Term of Reference, however can be used to inform the Committee's Report on others:

- *The implementation and operation of the electoral reform passed by the 47th Parliament, particularly regarding the use of money or capital in the most recent election.*

Our church did not make any donations to any political candidate or party. Whether parishioners from the church donated money is entirely a matter for them. As such, the church can't say how much was donated by individual parishioners to any political party.

However, given the amount of misinformation already in the media, and this pending Inquiry, we were concerned that without a more substantive answer on donations that this misinformation would continue. To respond to an enquiry from Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* in early October, we reached out to Australian parishioners of the church who are known to have strong political views as to their donations.

Based on those who responded, and the [article which was published more than a month ago](#), we provide the following information for the Committee, noting that this may not be a complete list and there may be other individual parishioners, or businesses they are associated with, who made donations over the reportable threshold which we aren't aware of and can't confirm.

- Neither the church, nor its Directors, nor the church's most senior leader [REDACTED], nor his immediate family made any reportable donations.
- Under the rules of the Electoral Act, PBCC is not required to register as a significant third party or associated entity.
- Based on our inquiries, five parishioners came forward who said they had made individual political donations to Advance, totalling around \$700,000.

3. Traditionally members of our church have abstained from voting on religious grounds, but for many people this has changed.

This response relates primarily to the following Term of Reference, however can be used to inform the Committee's Report on others:

- *The implementation and operation of the electoral reform passed by the 47th Parliament, particularly regarding the use of money or capital in the most recent election.*

Traditionally many, but not all, of our parishioners abstained from either voting or actively participating in politics, or both. The religious basis for this belief is in Romans 13 which states, amongst other things, that *"there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God,"* and was interpreted by many but not all of us as a need to not participate in electoral processes.

That said, this was never a rule, it was never a test of church fellowship, and it has certainly changed. Over the past few decades, practices and norms in our Church have evolved like in any other church. In the same period, for example, you have seen fewer Catholics observing Lent or abstaining from meat on Fridays. One of the changes we have seen over time, is more of our members choosing to vote, and some volunteering in campaigns. It is important that this democratic right be respected, while the right of to abstain on religious grounds protected.

Like anyone else in society or religion, if our individual parishioners take an interest in politics and decide to support an individual politician or particular campaign, this is at their own discretion, and they do not represent the Church's view when doing so.

4. We agree that reform is needed to help prevent aggressive conduct, deliberate obstruction, and intimidating behaviour at electoral booths.

This response relates primarily to two Term of Reference, however can be used to inform the Committee's Report on others:

- *Assessment and review of the purported increase in incidents of aggressive conduct, deliberate obstruction, and intimidating behaviour towards voters, political participants, volunteers, and Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) officials;*
- *Potential reform of safety and security arrangements, including consideration of the powers, processes, and capacity of the AEC to manage and address increasingly threatening or disruptive behaviour.*

Noting the Terms of Reference, in preparation for, and to assist, this Inquiry, we actively sought feedback from parishioners from our church who participated in the last election, to provide accounts of their experiences on booths.

Some 61 replies were received with instances of poor behaviour experienced by members of our church, some of which was witnessed by third parties and some of which was recorded. Twenty-six of the reports related to incidents on pre-poll, while the remainder were on polling booths or in the streets.

We have summarised the following experiences for the benefit of the Committee whilst redacting personal information to protect privacy. They are as follows:

- An MP's father in the Sydney region walked up to a volunteer from our church, and asked him "how's your bum?" amongst other homophobic inferences.
- A person at Kew Primary School being verbally attacked so viciously she was brought to tears, before former Victorian Premier [REDACTED] stepped in to stop it.
- A current [REDACTED] Senator shouted into his phone in the Cecil Hills area that there were cults on the booths.
- A [REDACTED] volunteer walking up and down the voting line yelling that the [REDACTED] candidate was in a cult, holding a copy of a newspaper that had a story about our church on the front page.
- At least two additional examples of sitting [REDACTED] MPs walking up to volunteers and asking them "Are you Exclusive Brethren?", one of which was filming the volunteer at the time.
- Multiple examples from across Australia of journalists coming up to volunteers and asking them their religion and whether they have the right to hand out how to vote cards.
- A [REDACTED] volunteer in Bathurst accusing the parishioner of hypocrisy because they don't vote and asking where they worked and went to school.
- A [REDACTED] volunteer in Bathurst shouted that she won't stand next to parishioners because of their religion.
- A [REDACTED] volunteer in Mudgee saying our parishioners are evil, our children are unable to socialise with others, and volunteers' wives are indoctrinated.
- A [REDACTED] volunteer in Ulladulla loudly asking a parishioner if "she feels like she is stuck in a cult?"

- A [REDACTED] volunteer in Sussex Inlet claiming to other volunteers that members of our church are paid to volunteer (which was corrected on the spot).
- An [REDACTED] at East Nowra Public School shouting that because a person was supporting a [REDACTED], they were “supporting sexual predators like [REDACTED].”

Recommendations for Consideration

Our Church does not have detailed knowledge of the electoral system, so apologises if the following repeats work already achieved or underway, or which is otherwise unworkable. However that said, we make the following recommendations for consideration of the Committee:

Australian Electoral Commission

We recommend that the AEC issues guidance including as follows:

1. In regards to behaviour on election booths, is completely unacceptable for any volunteers to be singled out, insulted, or discriminated against based on their religion.
2. A reminder to all candidates and Members of Parliament that calling out a person’s religion, in an effort to sway votes towards them or away from someone else, is not in line with the expectations of modern Australia.
3. A reminder to family members of MPs and candidates that they should not resort to discrimination based on someone’s religion or sexual orientation while on booths.

Australian Parliament

We recommend that the Australian Parliament considers legislation or regulation to:

4. Protect freedom of religion in Australia. The Parliament should introduce (or reintroduce) legislation which gives specific federal protections against religious discrimination for people of faith.

ENDS