16 May 2016
Inquiry into Aboriginal Youth Suicides
Education and Health Standing Committee
Legislative Assembly
Parliament of Western Australia

Dear Ms Alison Sharpe and Committee,

Inquiry into Aboriginal Youth Suicides

The Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the Education and Health Standing Committee on its inquiry into Aboriginal Youth suicides.

The Australian Christian Lobby

The Australian Christian Lobby’s (ACL) vision is to see Christian principles influencing the way we are governed, do business, and relate to each other as a community. ACL seeks to see a compassionate, just and moral society through having the public contributions of the Christian faith reflected in the political life of the nation.

With over 50,000 supporters, ACL facilitates professional engagement and dialogue between church and state, allowing the voice of the Church and of individual Christians to be heard in the public square. ACL is neither party-partisan nor denominationally aligned and lobbies in the Federal Parliament and all State and Territory Parliaments.

Submission to Inquiry into Aboriginal Youth Suicide

We note the Committee will be inquiring and reporting on “what more can be done to halt the worrying number of suicides among Aboriginal youth in Western Australia, particularly in remote communities, and to determine what resources have been set aside to tackle this crucial issue facing the State.” This report will offer recommendations (outlined on page 12) addressing sub-section (c) of the Terms of Reference: “The gaps in strategies and services available to reduce Aboriginal youth suicide in remote areas and ways to address these gaps, including broader mental health strategies and services.” Based on our findings which will be expanded below, our recommendations are as follows: 1) Implement a mentoring program to connect Aboriginal elders with youth; 2) implement programs based on the advice of the community, increase dialogue between government agencies and community elders; 3) Encourage and support youth to connect with their land and culture.
Included in our submission is diverse research based on studies and viewpoints from Aboriginal elders within to validate the effectiveness of these three proposed strategies.

As will be discussed, disempowerment is the main driver of suicide for Aboriginal people. Therefore, any effective strategy that seeks to reduce suicide rates, should alleviate a person’s sense of empowerment.

1. Reasons for youth suicide amongst Aboriginal Communities

To effectively formulate strategies countering the suicide rate of Aboriginal youth, an understanding of why the individual chose to end his or her life needs to first be established. The issues and circumstances surrounding Aboriginal youth are unique, and it would be a mistake to assume strategies which have proven to be effective in European or Western cultures would also suffice in Aboriginal communities.

The table below highlights the differences in reasons for suicide amongst Aboriginal people compared to non-Aboriginal people. Commonly, a person chooses to end their life at the end of a long period of suppressed rage or trauma. The source of that trauma is what varies, this is what needs to be analyzed and addressed. Amongst Aboriginal communities, the trauma can be imbedded from previous generations or social marginalization,¹ and can surface when triggered.²

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Aboriginal people</th>
<th>Non-Aboriginal people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main driver</strong></td>
<td>Disempowerment</td>
<td>Risk factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples</strong></td>
<td>Mental illness, substance abuses, sexual abuse trauma, loss of land and culture, trans-generational trauma, grief and loss, racism, social exclusion.</td>
<td>Psychiatric disorders (e.g. depression), stressful life events, substance abuse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Environment</strong></td>
<td>Acute poverty, denied rights, third-world conditions, missing access to the benefits of education and hard work.</td>
<td>High levels of social disadvantage ranging from unemployment, to homelessness, incarceration and family problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Historical experiences</strong></td>
<td>High influence, transgenerational trauma of massacres, war and genocide.</td>
<td>Not very influential.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/people/aboriginal-suicide-rates#axzz4MSwjh1S

The table shows disempowerment is the main suicide motivator for Aboriginal people. That disempowerment, or sense of hopelessness combined with environmental circumstances such as poverty or denial of rights, can lead to destructive behavior, substance abuse, mental illness, etc.

http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/people/aboriginal-suicide-rates#axzz4MSwjh1S
² Ibid.
The combination of these can become unbearable and the person is left overwhelmed and incapable of dealing with their issues. Often, the source of these feelings is so deeply rooted that they are unable to identify it, and therefore unable to address it. Rage is what surfaces and overwhelsms individuals in unbearable situations, they can neither fight nor flee.\(^3\) It intensifies if the individual’s life becomes a cycle of these situations over a long period of time and the sufferer is left powerless to retaliate.

Research informs us that rage or violence is the “prime mover” of suicide,\(^4\) and usually an individual who self-harms has endured physical violence, emotional or sexual abuse as a child or young adult.\(^5\) Violence and abuse are widespread amongst Aboriginal communities. Given the circumstances that surround these communities, it can only take a minor adverse event to trigger feelings of suicide, for example, becoming unemployed or relationship stress.\(^6\)

Poverty also plays a significant role in leading a person to feel disempowered. It breeds a sense of helplessness over finances or a lifestyle.\(^7\) Research conducted in the Kimberley shows that extreme poverty is directionally proportionate to the rates of suicide and self-harm.\(^8\) Poverty is just one of the circumstantial factors that can lead to depression or self-harm behavior. Gerry Georgatos, an Aboriginal journalist and researcher in suicide prevention and racism, provides an alternative way of looking and analyzing the causes of suicide. For Aboriginal communities, a huge driver is their environment.\(^9\) The government needs to be aware of, and needs to address these social issues to have any positive influence in this area.

Continuous racism is also a major cause of suicide.\(^10\) Walmajarri and Bunaba Kimberley mother, Lena Andrews, who lost her 18-year-old daughter to suicide in 2014, states:

> **Our people are smashed by it [racism], hurt by it, tortured by it. This is a nation of two peoples. The First Peoples and the Australian peoples and unless First Peoples do as they’re told then they are punished by every means imaginable.**\(^11\)

Despite government efforts, racism is widely prevalent across the nation. The feelings of inferiority can attack a person’s self-worth and identity. If this is not dealt with, it can foster within individuals and communities, facilitating an environment where the person is so deeply hurt that self-harm or

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\(^3\) Ibid.
\(^5\) Ibid.
\(^8\) Ibid.
\(^11\) Ibid.
suicide becomes a regular consideration.\textsuperscript{12}

Generational trauma is also a huge driver in Aboriginal suicide.\textsuperscript{13} Many Aboriginal people have experienced trauma through child abuse while in Aboriginal missions, when their children were stolen or when they lose their homelands. The hurt lingers with them through their adult life and is passed onto their offspring. If the trauma is not addressed, it can become unbearable:

\begin{quote}
There were all these funerals, these preventable deaths, that were happening and people were reaching a sense of hopelessness. They felt that they couldn’t address their issues, and that death was the only answer.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

The inaccessibility of support services is also a major issue that needs immediate government attention. Many young Aboriginal people have lost faith in services that could help them, such as the counseling service Kids Helpline.\textsuperscript{15} They doubt the cultural competence and generally don’t believe in the value of the service.\textsuperscript{16} Some youth have concerns regarding confidentiality – they’re afraid of their issues being leaked into their community, while others fear that using a service would result in shame for themselves or their family, being judged, ridiculed or punished. Nonetheless, one of the biggest barriers in rural and remote areas remains access to such services. Wendy Protheroe, general manager of the Kids Helpline has stated, “we need to ensure there are more Indigenous counselors and that all counselors have a better cultural awareness and understanding.”\textsuperscript{17} These programs need to cater to the Aboriginal communities and take into account their specific needs.

Sustained alcohol and substance abuse, problems with psychosis, and a lack of self-esteem are also major contributor to the high suicide rates amongst Aboriginal communities.\textsuperscript{18} The only empowerment that they see they can hold, is over their own bodies and lives.\textsuperscript{19} Many Aboriginal youth struggle with their identity and self-worth. Gerry Georgatos explains “[Aboriginal identities] have taken hits over a long period of time that other Australian identities have not,”\textsuperscript{20} This distinguishes Aboriginal suicides from any others. He also states “for many Aboriginal peoples their identity is often a liability.”\textsuperscript{21} They are not proud of their heritage; this needs to be addressed. Below, elders explain the significance in developing cultural identity and the role it plays in building their self-worth. Youth need to be encouraged to embrace their identity and culture.

All these issues mentioned above feed into the umbrella cause of disempowerment. Until these factors are addressed on a more specific scale, no significant improvement will be upheld.

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\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Above n 1.
\textsuperscript{15} “Barriers for Kids Detailed,” Koori Mail, 507, p31.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} “A call to action,” Koori Mail, 458, p.6.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
2. Strategies
2.1 Mentoring

One-on-one mentoring has proven to be highly effective in preventing anti-social behavior and other mental health issues.\(^{22}\) Mentoring often involves tutoring or life skills training and coaching. The supportive, healthy relationships formed between mentors and mentees are both immediate and long-term and contribute to a host of benefits for the mentees.

Mentoring also guarantees to youth that there is someone who cares about them, is willing to invest in a relationship and assures them they are not alone in dealing with their day-to-day challenges. Consequently, this improves the way they view themselves and their self-value.

The largest mentoring study conducted in Canada in 2013 confirms that quality mentoring relationships have powerful positive effects on young people in a variety of personal, academic, and professional situations.\(^ {23}\) Ultimately, mentoring connects a young person to personal growth and development, and provides social and economic opportunities.

The Big Brothers Big Sisters Public/Private Venture study found that youth who meet regularly with their mentors are 46% less likely than their peers to start using illegal drugs and 27% less likely to start drinking.\(^ {24}\) The study showed that the strongest benefit from mentoring was a reduction in depressive symptoms.\(^ {25}\) As highlighted above, one of the main drivers of suicide is depression and mental health issues.

Generally, suicide prevention requests a greater emphasis to be placed on the mental health needs of youth. Depression has been linked to a number of short and long-term problems for young people, including suicidal behaviour, academic and social difficulties, and increased risk for substance abuse.\(^ {26}\) Mentoring has proven to be highly effective in countering depressive symptoms. The Public/Private Ventures study showed that participation in mentoring programs can improve and/or prevent the surfacing of depressive symptoms.\(^ {27}\)

Building relationship between the Elders and youth is necessary for the survival and health of the community. In the words of an elder:

\(^{25}\) Ibid.
\(^{26}\) Ibid.
\(^{27}\) Ibid.
We need our old people to come and talk to them in regards to culture. To survive, there has to be balance. When we were young and ready for knowledge, the old people would teach us culture – take us hunting, fishing, all of it – but today that’s not happening.\(^{28}\)

The Aboriginal culture is rich in its traditions and practices. This needs to be passed down to the youth, to allow them to feel a sense of belonging and responsibility. They need to feel that they are cared for by a respected member of their community, and they too have an important role to play in caring for others younger than them. These relationships within the community need to be nurtured:

\[]It’s important for young people to listen to the Elders to make their spirit strong. When the Elders speak to you, their words feed your soul and give you strength.\(^{29}\)\]

There are strong, articulate, intelligent and very wise elders within Aboriginal communities who share a vision in seeing their community flourish. They have a desire to help the future generations, to pass on their wisdom and knowledge. Implementing a mentoring program in Aboriginal communities can facilitate healthier relationships between the community, and improve mental health for Aboriginal youth, thereby reducing their suicide rates.

### 2.2 Government Dialogue with Elders and the Community

As mentioned above, disempowerment is one of the main drivers for suicide amongst Aboriginal youth. Elders of the community state that the Federal and State Government can empower individuals by showing support and listening to them, by investing the time to nurture the relationships between the community and the government, and to meet with community elders in person.\(^{30}\) What needs to happen is a return of the power, in effect, this would be government agencies asking community members for their views and opinions:

\[]Bringing outsiders into the Kimberley will not create succession, the legacies of change that we need. Outsiders bring in quick fixes, providing there is a level of government funding and resourcing. There are a lot of people running around trying to do good, but it doesn’t create inter-generational change. We want to up-skill our own people.\(^{31}\)\]

This sends the message that power over their community remains with them, not with the government or another third party. Relationship is one of the most powerful tools in effective communication,\(^{32}\) without an established relationship, advice from the government would be falling


\(^{29}\) Ibid, p 35.

\(^{30}\) Ibid, p 15.

\(^{31}\) Ibid.

on deaf ears.

The government should also enquire with the community when it comes to funding. An elder explains:

_You have to go and sit down with the people and learn from them. Most of the services that are in place are not working. You have to get rid of those services. At the end of the day, there is not enough funding going to what is needed. We need the elders to lead in the healing. As much as we’d like to, nowadays we can’t survive without the funding._\(^{33}\)

No other person can understand the true complexities of community social struggles, than the elders of that particular community. They are the best positioned to comment on what is effective, what is lacking, and where money should be invested into.

A higher level of cultural sensitivity needs to be engaged. It can also be condescending to a community to enforce a policy, without enquiring into their opinions. There are a number of elders that could be a vital asset to governmental policy.

One elder, highlights the lack of dialogue between the community and the government, and as a result, the unaffected suicide rates remain stagnant:

_ I haven’t seen any successful engagement in youth intervention happen as a result of outsider programs. Yet the system we operate within relies on bringing in outside people all the time. The statistics show that suicide rates in the Kimberley haven’t changed._\(^{34}\)

Drawing on another community to highlight the importance of cultural engagement, in Canada, a number of communities have taken responsibility to address youth suicide and self-harm. Since having more of an input in decision-making, these communities have experienced less alcohol abuse, less suicide, higher employment, higher rates of school attendance, and a healthier and happier society.\(^{35}\) They key here, is empowering Aboriginal people to take ownership and responsibility of their community issues. This should be the role of the government, to empower, not enforce. Elders have stated that they are seeking funding, to enable them to accomplish this:

_ We haven’t been funded because the Government hasn’t been listening to the people on the ground. The Government does consultations, but they go away and the bureaucracy gets a hold of those documents and when it comes back, it’s probably unrecognisable from the interview that was done on the ground. We have always heard of policy development from the ground up, but in my 25 years working in this area with government and community, I have never seen this happen. I have never seen them take and implement what the community is asking for if it doesn’t fit into the funding guidelines. It’s lost._\(^{36}\)

\(^{33}\) Above n 28, p 12.

\(^{34}\) Ibid, p 15.

\(^{35}\) Ibid.

\(^{36}\) Ibid, p 17.
Ideas on suicide prevention that stem from Canberra according to elders, often bear no resemblance to what is needed in the community and on the ground. That leads to frustration, they can see that the government provides funding, but it is ineffective if it is not being spent appropriately. The decision on how to best spend it should come from within the community:

**Balanda (white people) have been trying to fix Indigenous issues forever, for generations. Maningrida is probably one of the youngest communities and it has been hand fed with government money. If you are hand fed all the time, you’re going to sit down and expect that all the time. You’re not going to empower yourself. Balanda (white people) cannot fix community issues. Community issues need to be dealt with at a community level.**

There needs to be community-based programs developed in consultation with the elders. The community needs to develop and implement their own strategies to combat this suicide plague that they are suffering from:

*The Government doesn’t even go into the community and talk with people on the ground. They need to know. They need to come and speak to the people right here. To prevent suicide happening, they should be here listening to us, but nothing is happening...The Government needs to come before there’s a suicide. They need to get a meeting going and talk to the community, talk to the families, get the teenagers, the people in their twenties and thirties, get them together and talk to them. They need to support us so we can be ready.*

It is illogical to be seeking to help a community, yet not invest in the time to seek out the needs of that community and their viewpoints. Aboriginal elders understand their community and the struggles it faces:

*Just listen to us on the ground. We are not just talking for the sake of talking. We are talking from experience. We need the Government to listen to us and get behind what is working.*

Programs developed at the grass-roots level need to be supported and encouraged. The Balunu Foundation runs community based, grass roots developed and culturally appropriate healing programs. The founder, David Cole comments that some bureaucracies struggle to understand how this fits into their plan. Mr Cole emphasises that there is a need to bridge that misunderstanding, in his words, we “share the same vision just a different language.” The government needs to see the importance of implementing programs properly through community and through culturally appropriate programs, only then can we start to move forward together.

*We are getting the wrong answers from the Government. We are looking for answers through governments and outside organisations, but for us the answers are with the old people, the Elders. They know the way for us. They know how to help us and how to heal

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37 Ibid, p 49.  
38 Ibid.  
40 Ibid, p 29.  
41 Ibid.
Greater dialogue between the government and the community needs to happen before any real change can be expected. The Aboriginal culture and practices needs to be supported. Through the Aboriginal process, youth are given good discipline, good encouragement and good support. They are empowered. There is also a strong emphasis on respect, for yourself, for you community, for your land, and for those you encounter throughout your life. Strong culture teaches discipline and respect. It also sends the message to the youth that they are not alone, they are part of a community who genuinely care about their well-being. It gives them strength and motivation to continue. Programs which specifically address the needs of the community are able to make long-term change.

This brings us to our third recommendation, supporting and encouraging Aboriginal youth to learn about their culture, and appreciate the richness of their heritage.

2.3 Strengthening ties to culture and land

Suicide is a big problem for us. We have a diverse culture. It’s an old tradition. A lot of our young people are floating away from our culture and the things we teach them about respecting people, living peacefully and enjoying life as much as you can.

Research shows an Aboriginal persons of self-worth is strongly linked to their connection with their land and culture. Often the role this has on the livelihood of Aboriginal people is overlooked, and as a result, their relationship with their land and community is neglected. One Elder emphasises the importance of maintaining this relationship:

We want the Government to understand that not supporting homelands, not supporting cultural education, and not supporting cultural activities is actually a matter of life and death for us. It’s not just a nice little thing to support; it’s actually our people’s inner soul.

The Aboriginal people have a unique, spiritual connection to the land, culture and heritage. If the government is seeking to alleviate the quality of life of Aboriginal youth and target the causes of suicide, it needs to be prepared to invest resources to reconcile Aboriginal youth with their culture.

As mentioned above, disempowerment is one of the main drivers of suicide amongst Aboriginal communities. Understanding one’s culture, heritage, leads to a greater awareness of who they are, which leads to a positive perception of their identity and self-worth. It builds their confidence as they understand the role they play in the community, which in turn, empowers and motivates them.

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42 Ibid, p 35.
43 Ibid, p 55.
44 Ibid, p 46.
Elders within the Aboriginal communities have expressed their desire for government support to enable them to teach their youth, their culture, an elder states the significance culture plays in enhancing their quality of life: “When they have culture first they have the very thing that will hold them strong through their lives no matter what they choose to do or where they choose to do it”. Another elder suggests that the way to implement an effective ‘community centered’ approach is to allow local Elders to lead and build the community through cultural strength. The culture needs to be the foundation that is laid to help Aboriginal youth become stronger, with a more positive outlook on their future.

Aboriginal elders are seeking funding to be able to facilitate taking youth into the bush, to teach them their culture. There is a strong emphasis on the significant positive effect this would have on building a sense of identity and improving their self-worth: “Even once or twice a week will make a difference. Culture is an ongoing education, just like being at school; you’ve got to keep going out there to get that cultural education.”

The Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre (KALACC) was created to reconnect young people with their culture. Yiriman, a major initiative of KALACC, was established by the elders of four Kimberley language groups to target substance abuse and self-harm amongst the Aboriginal youth. Organisations like this who are working on the ground, have seen a huge emotional and social enhancement in the communities that they reach into. Research has demonstrated that a lack of identity can lead to mental health issues such as depression and self-harm. Programs which can detach a youth from negative circumstances and take them into a positive environment whilst connecting them to their culture, are able to provide them with deeper understanding of who they are. Identity has been established. As previously mentioned, a heightened perception of identity leads to a greater sense of empowerment, and in most cases, empowerment is what needs to be reinstated to prevent further suicides.

Elders of the organisation explain:

I want to educate these young people to identify in themselves what tribe they belong to and how they tick as Tiwi people because if you don’t have those things it’s very difficult to be proud of yourself...I think it’s important to identify. For our young people to know and practice what skin they belong to, what dance they belong to, and what country they belong to. If they know these things, they will stay strong within. This will also set a good example to friends, cousins and family.

Allowing someone to discover who they are creates the foundation for self-belief, self-confidence and self-respect. The elders are the most important part of this healing process. Without their knowledge, youth cannot reconnect to who they truly are. The elders are the ones who hold on to the culture and the Lore. They are the most important part of the healing process for the

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47 Ibid.
48 Ibid. p 10.
50 Ibid, p 22.
When we lose that [identity], we lose who we are and when you lose who you are what do you have to live for? And many of our people are giving up; many of our people are suffering because of that loss of spirit loss of identity.\textsuperscript{52}

Taking youth onto the land has been described as a “healing” process. There is a lot of hurt which could be generational, or they may have experienced their own pain and trauma. Unless this is dealt with at the source, little if any, positive growth can be done. Elders stress the importance of cultural engagement:

We need the Government to help us with funds to end youth suicide. We need funds to help us get back into the cultural ways with the Elders. It’s got to be cultural so the kids can learn from these old people.\textsuperscript{53}

Another organisation, the Pelican catamaran, who focus on connecting people with the sea, went into a number of Aboriginal communities to offer their services. During the time the Pelican was operating, elders reported a significant reduction in youth self-harm rates.\textsuperscript{54} When the funding ceased, suicides started to emerge again.\textsuperscript{55}

There is also a spiritual aspect which is heightened being on country:

\begin{quote}
I want the young people to be out there on their homeland. To feel that freedom, to feel our ancestors out there, you can feel them when you go there... When you hunt and feel the freedom of the land, you can feel spirit calling you back. For the Aboriginal people, the elders are the most critical part of the program for healing...They get to reconnect with culture, land and spirit. They can get away from the negative outside influences that unfortunately are a daily part of life in our world.\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

Elders have also expressed the necessity for more healing centres for at-risk youth. Based on traditional practices, the centre would facilitate a reconnection with their land and culture, whilst providing an environment for them to express their pain in a healthy manner:

\begin{quote}
The healing centre will be a strong beacon for young people to get their feet back on the ground. To find their way and be inspired to live life differently. In essence, the healing centre would give them the tools to be better people, to be stronger, to be able to withstand peer pressure and other pressures in life. Like ripples in the pond, one person sees someone saying, “no I’m going to live my life differently now.” And others will follow and change too.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid, p 9.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, p 26.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, p 28.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, p 30, 42.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid, p 43.
A strong cultural support provides a strong foundation. Youth within Aboriginal communities are missing an opportunity to formulate their cultural identity:

To bring our kids back from a suicidal way of thinking, we need to be self-managing our healing and strengthening our culture for those kids.  

### 3. Recommendations

Based on the above findings, we would recommend the government implements strategies and programs which empower Aboriginal youth, specifically:

1. **Implement a mentoring program to connect Aboriginal elders with youth.**
   Studies have proven Mentoring to be highly effective in improving social behavior and mental health. Feelings of depression, inferiority, disempowered, helplessness etc need to be effectively targeted before any real long-term change can take place.

2. **Implement programs based on the advice of the community.**
   The elders from the community play a critical role in the shaping of their society, they also hold a wealth of knowledge and wisdom. They need to be engaged and listened to as they understand the complexities surrounding their communities and are able to offer effective ideas and strategies that tie in with their culture. Dialogue between government agencies and community elders needs to be strengthened.

3. **Encourage and support youth to connect with their land and culture.**
   As highlighted above, this empowers youth and builds their sense of identity and self-worth. It connects them to the community. As a result feelings of being unvalued, unimportant, easily detached etc are mitigated. Community binds them to one another.

Included in our submission is diverse research based on studies and viewpoints from Aboriginal elders within the community to validate the effectiveness of these three proposed strategies. We thank you for your consideration of our views.

Yours sincerely,

Dahlia Messiha  
WA State Director  
Australian Christian Lobby

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58 Ibid, p 53.