

## Comment on Current Charity situation of Exclusive Brethren

### 1. Background

1.2 In the summer of 2012 the Exclusive Brethren were denied charitable status specifically in relation to their meeting room owned by the Preston Down Trust.

1.3 There has been considerable public discussion including newspaper articles and participation in TV shows. Parliament debated it (13 November 2012) and it was discussed by the Public Administration Committee of the House of Commons on 30 October 2012 under the chairmanship of the Rt Hon Bernard Jenkin MP;

### 2. Public benefit

2.2 The Charity Commission have decided that the Meeting Rooms owned by this particular Group of Brethren (until November of this year known as Exclusive Brethren and so described on their own website but now described by themselves on their new site as Plymouth Brethren Christian Church) are not properly open to the public.

2.3 For some 50 years, denial of public attendance at meetings has been absolute with a handful of exceptions. Contrary to the pictures displayed on the current website, main meeting rooms are surrounded by high security fences and locked gates. These gates are locked at all times except for access prior to scheduled meetings: they are also locked during meetings. Larger or special occasions also use security guards.

2.4 The notice boards, until about September of this year, have indicated no meeting times or welcome.

2.5 There has been no interaction with non-members for half a century apart from the minimum to survive. Over the last 15 years or so children have at first been increasingly home-schooled and now in Brethren Schools. Even sharing a cup of tea with non-members - including immediate family - has been disallowed for half a century.

2.6 The 'Universal Leader', Mr Bruce David Hales of Sydney, Australia, declared in March 2006

*"We have to get a hatred, and utter hatred of the world. Unless you've come to a hatred of the world you're likely to be sucked in by it, and seduced by it. You must hate the world, every feature of the world, at every point you hate it."*

2.7 The Exclusive Brethren now maintain - as stated on their website - that they provide food for the poor. Reality is that since Summer of this year following the indication that they were losing charitable status, they have organised what are known as 'Free Pie and Bible Days'. These do not make any bias towards the poor. Some see them, given their novelty,

as an attempt to persuade the authorities that they are for public benefit.

- 2.8 Public Benefit must also include the freedom of individuals to leave without loss. This cannot happen. Everyone who leaves loses all or almost all contact with family (including spouse, children and parents if they remain members) for all time. It will most often include loss of employment and home since employment is generally within the church membership and funding for homes is provided by church membership.
- 2.9 Implicit in the term 'Public benefit' must be the absence of harm.
- 2.10 Misleading information: whilst it is of course legitimate to change a name and reconstruct a website, it should not be done in such a way as to make it appear that it involves an entirely different organisation. Despite the claim that Plymouth Brethren Christian Church is the historic name (<http://www.plymouthbrethrenchristianchurch.org/>) it is an entirely new invention. Two months ago that name did not exist. At least one member of the House of Commons has been misled. Mr Ian Paisley Jnr (North Antrim DUP) praised the work of the brethren in setting up the 'every boys rally' and every girls rally' which attract tens of thousands of young people. This relates to the Open Brethren, an entirely different organisation and one which has no connection whatever to the Exclusive Brethren apart from the 1828 founder.

### 3. Information Technology

- 3.2 For many years the Exclusive Brethren banned the use of computers. It was stated on their original website - of all places - that they did not use the internet. One of their spokesman claimed in a BBC Everyman programme in 2003 that they did not use computers or the internet because of the association with the 'Mark of the Beast' and '666'.
- 3.3 The Exclusive brethren were able, on the basis of their conscience, to claim exemption from filing returns to HMRC electronically. They were also able, exceptionally, to complete Government Surveys such as the Labour Force Survey carried out by the Office for National Statistics in paper form.
- 3.4 In recent years, they have reversed this position and Mr Hales' company actually sells IT equipment. Indeed, generally this is the form of hardware which Exclusive Brethren must buy.
- 3.5 There is nothing whatsoever wrong with people including religious groups having a change of view. This has happened down the ages and will continue and is generally held to be a good thing. The difficulty arises in the following ways:
- Where no admission is made of a change (whether in the use of IT or the opening up of meeting rooms to the public) but it is represented that nothing has changed and it was always that way

- Where people who anticipate the changes are disciplined for their actions. For example, I am aware of and can document individuals who owned computers prior to their being permitted and who, when discovered, were consequently excommunicated. This meant, for some, loss of spouse (who chose to remain within the church) and children.

#### 4. Education

The Exclusive Brethren provide education within their schools. There is nothing wrong with this in itself but the prospectus for their schools states that they assist students to reach their full potential (<http://www.focus-school.com/>). The icon button for education on the Exclusive Brethren current website is, somewhat ironically, a graduate's academic cap. Since University education and obtaining a degree is absolutely banned it is difficult to see how a student's potential can possibly be achieved or that any member of the Exclusive Brethren will graduate.

#### 5. Scrutiny

5.2 During the questioning by the Commons PAC, Mr Garth Christie, one of the UK Brethren leaders, made this statement:

“We do not mind any of the questions. We welcome scrutiny, that is not a problem to us. If any of the members have further questions they would like to send in or approach us about, we welcome it. We have nothing to hide.”

5.3 When considering this statement it should be understood that the Exclusive Brethren have had closed down 3 websites where ex-members have exchanged news and information, asked questions or expressed views and criticism. The current website which ex-members use has had restrictions placed on it by the Brethren. They often appear to be portrayed as David in a David and Goliath confrontation but this does not really tell the story. Due to massive wealth they have been able to pursue legal cases as far as they wish and well beyond the resources of their opposite number. Currently, a number of former members are in receipt of lawyer's letters in an attempt to silence them and a piece of academic work has also been challenged. This can also be seen in the huge international building programme which has taken place over recent years amounting to many millions of pounds. Churches with much larger attendance would not be able to even begin such a programme.

#### 6. Theology

6.1 It is understood that it is generally not the role of either the Charity Commission or Government to take a view on doctrine; however, the consequences of doctrine are important. For example, it would be right to be concerned of a church banned a member from benefitting from life saving medical procedures, such as happens with Christian Scientists and Jehovah's Witnesses.

6.2 The Exclusive brethren have always cited as their charter verse (this was on their old site but not their current one) this verse from St Paul's 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to Timothy, chapter 2:19 which states:

*“let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.”*

Apart from the odd use of one verse over all others to define themselves, they have interpreted this as being separate from everyone who does not share exactly their own views and is a member of their church. This interpretation is eccentric and unique. It is a significant misuse of the Greek word ἀδικία which is translated *iniquity* or *unrighteousness* and relates to separation from wrong acts, not people with whom you disagree. This misunderstanding is unsurprising given that there is no higher education allowed and no Exclusive Brethren leaders have any training or even minimal knowledge of Greek.

6.2 It is difficult to understand how, given such a view of the world outside their own persuasion, Exclusive Brethren can be for public benefit since by its nature that would require engagement with people.

## 7. The view of others

7.2 It is worth considering the view of others:

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/exclusive\\_brethren\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/exclusive_brethren_1.shtml)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-shropshire-12182333>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exclusive\\_Brethren](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exclusive_Brethren)

<http://www.reachouttrust.org/shop/FreeDownloadsPDF/F013Exbreth.pdf>

## 8. Personal note

It is over 30 years since I left the Exclusive Brethren fellowship as an adult. 20 years after I left - 20 years during which I never once was able to see my parents - my mother died. I had not even been informed that she was ill until about an hour before she died. Three years later at the time of the BBC Everyman documentary there was a slight softening of the rules and I was able to visit my father three times before he, too, died including a visit the week before he died. I received a call at about 11.30 one evening to inform me of the funeral service which was to take place at 6.30 the following morning. Since I live over 400 miles away attendance was made impossible. Apart from one brief visit with my daughter before my father died, my children never knew their grandparents. I have an unknown number of nephews, nieces and great nephews and great nieces. I have never seen them.

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*John Weightman MBE*

*jweightman49@gmail.com*