

For Christine Wallach life began at 50 when she quit the sect that dominated her life - but her decision means she may never see her daughters again

*Yours exclusive*

# ‘We escaped from a sect’

By Clare Grant

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Christine Wallach is every inch the confident businesswoman. Aged 62, she juggles running a holiday cottage catering company, studying for a degree and managing her own tearoom and art gallery. Yet Christine's life was once more like the days of Oliver Cromwell's strict puritan regime than modern Britain.

As a member of a religious sect called the Exclusive Brethren, her routine revolved around religious meetings and housework. She was forbidden to disobey her husband, talk to anyone from the outside world, wear make-up or bright clothes, cut her hair, read books, watch TV or listen to music.

But 13 years ago Christine broke away from the sect - a decision that today is still having consequences. "I've been punished for breaking the rules," she says. "I'm not allowed to see my grandchildren or my two eldest daughters. They're married to two Exclusive Brethren brothers and are forbidden to talk to me. When I left I knew it would happen, but I had to save the rest of my family. I had to make a choice between them and my other children."

Christine was born into an Exclusive Brethren family in 1944. At school, small

incidents set her apart, such as not being allowed to watch the Coronation because she was forbidden from going to the cinema. "Most of the time I was perfectly contented - I didn't miss what I didn't have."

Then in 1959 a charismatic leader called James Taylor Junior took over the Exclusive Brethren and their lives were transformed. Any frivolity was banned, from eating with people from the outside world to wearing red clothes. "The Exclusive Brethren felt more like a cult than a religion," she says. "We didn't know a lot of what went on in the world."

Christine became a dentist's receptionist but had to give up in 1967 when she married her childhood sweetheart Andrew because married women were forbidden to work. In 1970 a wave of mass hysteria swept through the community after a member confessed a sin, prompting others to follow. "The mood was hypnotic," recalls Christine. "We admitted we had used contraception and committed unclean behaviour in the back of a car before we were married. It was just kissing and petting."

The couple were punished by being suspended from the sect.

"I was made to feel so wicked that when our next baby didn't arrive for ages I thought it was God's judgement."

Then Christine and Andrew fell foul of their leaders when they moved house. "It was seen as rebellious because we'd dared to move nearly two miles away from the meeting place."

Soon after they moved Andrew was denounced for being too ambitious in his job as director of the family laboratory supplies business and they were again suspended. "We weren't allowed to sleep together, speak to each other or eat together."

Christine, who by now had two sons and five daughters, says she and Andrew didn't want to leave the sect then because they

were terrified of the 'outside world' and of leaving their family behind. "It was our two sons who brought about the end," says Christine. "If they hadn't rebelled, we'd still be in the Exclusive Brethren. At the time, though, I was so scared of being cast out I was wetting the bed."

Their sons began to sneak off to go skateboarding and to the cinema, and at the ages of 18 and 16 they went to a snooker club and got drunk. The family missed the 6am Sunday (meeting. Two elders visited them and the couple were again suspended. "It was devastating. We were cast into outer darkness," says Christine.

In 1994 Andrew lost his job and Christine says their five daughters were taken away to live with family and other sect members. "I sat at the window all day and cried," she says. "We struggled to convince our sons they were not to blame for our disgrace, but the elders had told them they were going to hell."

Andrew and the boys were excommunicated. Friends and family snubbed them. Christine was told that if they left their sons they could come back - and be reunited with their daughters. "Because of our conditioned mindset we thought that the girls would be safe with the Exclusive Brethren, but that the boys needed our protection, care and guidance. What a choice to make."

Short of cash, Christine took a job outside the Exclusive Brethren community as a saleswoman and was invited to a dinner. That invitation was the catalyst for a total life change. "I cut my waist-length hair, had a make-up lesson and bought an evening dress. It was an extreme act of rebellion."

Then, after nine months away, three of their daughters came home, although their two married daughters stayed with their husbands. Slowly the Exclusive Brethren's influence on Christine and Andrew broke. "We didn't know we wanted freedom until we had it. We began to have fun and

realised we'd missed out on culture, music, books, concerts, seeing the world."

In 2001 they moved to Lower Wensleydale in North Yorkshire to start again. Their marriage also went through a major readjustment. As an Exclusive Brethren male, Andrew had been head of the household and Christine was expected to do as she was told - something she began to question. "We had a few rows, but it's a testament to our love for each other and Andrew's strength of character that he was able to change and give up his Exclusive Brethren values," she says. Andrew, who became a warehouseman, supported Christine as she established her own catering company, enrolled on a catering degree course and set up a tearoom and art gallery. She is also about start a cake-making business with her son, which will employ former drug addicts to help them rehabilitate.

"My final act of defiance against the Exclusive Brethren was having my ears pierced this summer, which is a cardinal sin," says Christine. "I wouldn't go back for anything. We have freedom, independence and choice. I try not to think of my life as wasted and I don't blame anyone. My life began at 50 and that's how I look at it. It's heartbreaking that my two eldest daughters are still with the Exclusive Brethren, but I'm so thankful the rest of my family is free. Maybe one day I will see my eldest daughters again."

// For more details about Christine's home-cooked meal business contact 01677 450430.

// Yours attempted to contact the Exclusive Brethren for comment, but got no response. The sect, founded in 1830, follows a strict code of conduct based on the Bible and has more than 35,000 members. They protect themselves from being worldly, which means no television, radio, music, books of fiction, cinema, contraception or holidays. They only work with, socialise with and communicate with other sect members.