

Reclusive sect lifts hopes on contacts.

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ONE of the world's most reclusive Christian sects, the **Exclusive Brethren**, may be opening up to the world under new leader, Australian Bruce Hales, who took over on the death of his father, John, last year.

The sect had about 70,000 members worldwide, mainly in the US and Britain.

The **Exclusive Brethren**, evangelical Protestants, live within society but, like the Amish, shun the use of technology - including radios, computers, faxes and mobile phones.

They take the words and decisions of their leader - who they refer to as Vessel-Elect - as divine, and reject membership of groups such as sports clubs and unions.

Women must cover their heads with veils and submit to the authority of their husbands.

The approximately 5000 members thought to be living in Australia meet in high-security prayer halls boasting blacked-out windows.

Mr Hales, 50, lives in the northern Sydney suburb of Eastwood with his wife and children.

Since Mr Hales, who is the recipient of gifts of large sums each month from his worldwide congregation, assumed the mantle of Vessel-Elect, ex-members say followers of the cult have contacted them to apologise for past harsh treatment.

Ex-followers around Australia are now hoping that the thawing taking place under Mr Hales could led to renewed contact with family members still in the sect.

One Queensland ex-follower who fled when he was 17, but did not wish to be named because his six

brothers and sisters remained with the group, said most people felt cynical about the overtures but were nevertheless thankful to hear from their families.

"The head should be exposed for the amount of control they have over people's lives," he said. "It sent my mother mental but she couldn't leave."

Mr Hales was unavailable for comment.

Followers are born into the sect, which was founded in the 19th century and which rarely admits newcomers.

Instead, generation after generation of families have been raised within its confines.

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