

My life with the Brethren

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Roger Bennett, an ex-member of the Exclusive Brethren, in front of their Happy Valley complex. Picture: Stephen Laffer

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IT WAS a basic pub meal two pieces of fish and a handful of chips but to Roger Bennett it represented a significant departure from everything he had been taught to believe.

As a member of the Exclusive Brethren until January this year, the 28-year-old Adelaide man had been forbidden from eating in restaurants his whole life.

But two months after severing ties with the secretive religious group, Mr Bennett ventured into Brighton's Esplanade Hotel, as if he was visiting a foreign country.

"It was really weird, I didn't understand social etiquette or what was going on," he said.

"But it was an enjoyable meal, I got through it okay."

Mr Bennett, of Torrens Park, this week offered a rare insight into the world of the Exclusive Brethren, who shun contact with outsiders, or as he said they called them "worldlies".

Raised in Unley, just a few streets from the Brethren's Mary St meeting hall, Mr Bennett grew up in a typically large Brethren family, the eldest of five children.

He went to Highgate Primary, in the days before the Exclusive Brethren established its own school at St Mary's.

"We were picked on a bit because we didn't eat with everyone else but you kind of got used to it and moved on," he recalled.

"I did normal kid things, played with action figures, played with Brethren mates, it was just that we had relatively limited contact with the outside world."

Mr Bennett was in Year 5 when he said then Exclusive Brethren leader James Symington banned members from watching television. "One day we were allowed to watch it, the next day we weren't," he said.

"But it didn't really affect me that much. We didn't have a television at home so it wasn't as though I had any favourite programs I was missing out on." Mr Symington also banned the use of computers, Mr Bennett said, a decision that frustrated him more than anything. "I was one of the brighter kids in the class as far as computers went ... All of a sudden I wasn't able to do that anymore. But again, you moved on."

After attending Urrbrae Agricultural High School for a few years, Mr Bennett completed Years 11 and 12 through correspondence finishing with good grades. However, Mr Symington had also forbidden members from attending university, so like the majority of Exclusive Brethren youth, Mr Bennett was given work in a factory owned by a church member. "They really do look after their own, make sure everyone has got work," he said.

So with a job that paid well, a supportive family and a strong group of friendships that he had developed within the church, what was it that made him leave?

“There were a couple of different reasons,” Mr Bennett said. “I’ve always been curious about what the rest of the world has to offer. So I started doing a lot of reading, which is generally frowned upon because the Brethren have their own publications.”

Another reason was his inability to find a partner within the church. “You’re not actively encouraged to date, the Brethren have a fairly stern view of dating.

“Because you can only marry within the church, you travel around as much as you can interstate and overseas so that you’re meeting more girls. I did that for a few years and wasn’t having much luck and that’s when I started to ask a few questions. I wondered what I was doing wrong. I started thinking I needed to become more successful because the girls wanted someone who was wealthy and had their act together. But I still wasn’t having any luck ... Gradually feeling more and more disillusioned, Mr Bennett began distancing himself, started missing church services and breaking rules. “I bought a computer and a mobile phone. And was also sneaking out to watch movies every now and then. I was really starting to rock the boat. Everyone was wondering what I was doing with the computer, why I needed it. In February last year, Mr Bennett made the decision that he wanted to leave the church by the end of 2006. “I was becoming so far removed from them it was becoming difficult to have a conversation with anyone. I had a long-term idea of what I wanted to do with my life and where I wanted to go and it got to the stage where I wasn’t going to be able to do that as a member of the Brethren.”

Having known no other life, Mr Bennett said the decision to leave was not easy. “I just had to grit my teeth and say I’m leaving. “They would let me live at home but I would’ve had to eat in a separate room and get rid of my computer and my phone. I had no social network because all my friends were in the church, I only had one mate in Adelaide that knew what was going on. But after I left (in January this year) I’d never felt so good in all my life. I stood up for what I believed in and that’s so important.”

Life since leaving the Brethren hasn’t been easy Mr Bennett has been seeing a counsellor and has had health issues but it has also been exciting. “There were so many things I hadn’t tried. I’d never been inside a nightclub before or even a pub. I’d never been part of a club before.”

He now is a member of a public speaking group based at Parkside and he has been able to pursue his passion for Mini Cooper cars, as a member of the Sporting Car Club of SA. Because of his decision to leave the Exclusive Brethren, Mr Bennett is able to contact his family only by telephone, and that’s “pretty infrequent”. “It’s hard because they really want me to come back. They’d have me back in a second. They’d give me financial security, something I don’t really have at the moment. But I wouldn’t go back in a million years. I’m happy with my life now.” An Exclusive Brethren spokesman says the church made a decision to move its headquarters further south several years ago because of a need for cheaper housing for its members.

A spokesman for the group Tony McCorkell, a Queensland-based public relations consultant, said the Exclusive Brethren had decided to move south “about three or four years ago”. Mr McCorkell said the Exclusive Brethren had between 350 and 400 Adelaide members, a “large number” of whom had moved to the Happy Valley/Flagstaff Hill area in the past few years. Previously these members had lived in the suburbs south of the city, between Unley and St Mary’s. All large meetings, which attract visitors from interstate and overseas, now are held in the Brethren’s \$2.2 million complex at Happy Valley. A Messenger investigation revealed last week that the Exclusive Brethren have bought up millions of dollars in property around Happy Valley and Flagstaff Hill in the past few years.

The group has recently had plans for a 120-seat hall on Black Rd, Flagstaff Hill, approved by Onkaparinga Council. Messenger made several attempts to get in contact

with senior Adelaide members of the Exclusive Brethren last week but calls were not returned.