

World without sin.

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ALEX DEVINE explains how a cult calling itself the **Exclusive Brethren** uses a strange kind of religion to split families, sometimes forever WHEN Brendan Shirreff was 26, his younger brother was killed in an accident, and he asked permission from his church to attend the funeral.

He was a member of the **Exclusive Brethren**, a Christian sect that forbids unnecessary contact with outsiders. His brother, who had left five years before, was an outsider.

He was quizzed by church elders about why he wanted to go. He was questioned about his attitude to the Brethren. Then he was told the church was going to "withdraw from" him and his family. They were excommunicated.

His wife continued to talk to a member of the church. She was pregnant with their fourth child.

Brendan began to get a bad feeling. One day he came home from work and found the house had been cleaned out. His wife and children had disappeared.

When he found her about eight weeks later, she'd returned to the church and wouldn't talk to him. "When I tried to talk to her, she'd call the police," he said.

That was eight years ago. He didn't talk to his wife again until last Christmas.

The **Exclusive Brethren** is estimated to have about 50,000 members worldwide, and about 5000 in Australia. With rare exceptions, all members are born into the faith. They are forbidden to use radios, televisions, faxes, computers or mobile phones. Women wear scarves to indicate their subservience to their husbands.

They live within the world, but do everything they can to minimise contact with it. They believe contact with outsiders will lead them into sin. They run businesses and attend schools, but are forbidden to make friends with their workmates. They can't belong to clubs or unions.

They take all their meals together, and meet for worship every day between 7pm and midnight, and all day Sunday, starting at 6am. The windows of their meeting houses are covered.

Members who have been excommunicated, sometimes for petty offences or because of private vendettas, are shut off from any further contact. Families are divided, sometimes permanently.

A website for ex-members includes obituaries, so people can check if their relatives have died.

But last year, when Sydney businessman Bruce Hales was appointed the new leader of the church, things began to change.

Ex-members started to get phone calls from family who hadn't talked to them for decades. Church elders began apologising and inviting people to come back.

Philip McNaughton, a spokesman for the Brethren, denied the church deliberately divided families, but he conceded that church doctrine made it difficult for outsiders to stay in touch. He said the new practice was meant to "put wrongs right."

But some ex-members don't want renewed contact.

Tim Lee has started to get phone calls from family members who haven't talked to him for years, but he says he isn't interested.

"I'm living my life now, and I'm enjoying it."

Fourteen years ago, Mr Lee was accused of immoral conduct, and ordered to pack his bags and leave his wife and nine-month-old baby, who had spina bifida.

Mr Lee didn't see his son again until he was five. Now he gets one hour a fortnight with him in the garage of the old family home.

For years after he was cast out, Mr Lee wanted to get back in. He abided by the rules, even though he was out of the church. He didn't have a radio or a TV. He only talked to his workmates about the job, and he refused to eat meals with them.

Sundays were the hardest. He'd go for long walks for four or five hours, "just to chew up time".

After four years, he gave up hope of going back, but he still had trouble adjusting to the world outside. The first time he ate a meal in a restaurant, he picked up his plate to take it into the kitchen and wash it up. When he stayed at a motel, he made the bed in the morning.

Then, in 1995, he met a woman, and the next year they got married and had a daughter. The family now lives in Merrylands.

He'd like his son to spend some time with his half-sister. "I'd love to bring him home and have a whole day with him," Mr Lee said. "He's never known me as a father."

The Brethren deny that children get same treatment as adults, but Mr Shirriff claims that when he was 12 he was severely punished for being late for prayers.

His parents were excommunicated when he was 10, and he was raised by eight different families.

During his punishment, he claimed, he was confined to a room and meals were left at the door.

"I copped it on the chin," Mr Shirriff said. "I knew one day I'd be old enough to leave."

But when he did finally leave, it took years for him to recover. He'd built up an \$850,000 business, but says most of the money went on legal battles.

He started taking drugs, working just enough to sustain his cocaine habit. A few years after he left, the Salvation Army picked him up off the street.

But by the time the Brethren started to contact him, things were looking up. He'd done a computer and a finance course, and was travelling the world running his own construction business. He'd joined a more mainstream church, the Assemblies of God. He was planning to remarry.

"I was on a bit of a roll. And then people come out and say everything that's happened to you has been lies."

He was told he had been wrongfully excommunicated, and promised that he might be readmitted to the church and remarry his wife.

"When I started speaking to my wife again I thought I might be able to win her out of the religion, remarry her and live happily ever after with the children.

"But she's been heavily indoctrinated. I'll always be the baddie."

He saw his children briefly last month. It was the first time he'd seen them in three years.

He thought of rejoining just to persuade his wife to leave with him.

"But the trauma on my kids' faces was too much."

Tenets of the Exclusive faith * The **Exclusive Brethren** is an extremist offshoot of the Plymouth Brethren, founded in 1825 * There are about 50,000 members worldwide under the command of Australian Bruce Hales (pictured left) * Members are not allowed television, radio, magazines, newspapers, computers or any other modern communication method.

* They do not vote, stand for public office or join unions. They reject life insurance, university education or military service * Men wear coat and tie and women must have long hair with a head covering, modest clothing and no make-up * The Brethren have had a history of dictatorial and dogmatic leaders with a firm belief that only sect members will be saved at the end of the world.

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