

# **THE BRETHREN:**

## ***An Investigation into Marriage and Family Relations Among the Exclusive Brethren in Australia***

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The Exclusive Brethren are a small Christian religious denomination with origins in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. They are committed to a simple way of life that emphasises the acceptance of a plain reading of the scriptures as a guide to life, reject the need for clergy, are strongly focused on family life and strictly control their relationships with the world. This paper examines the pattern of marriage and family relations found among the Exclusive Brethren in Australia and compares it with the general population and with selected other Christian denominations.

In response to some queries about their family life, the Exclusive Brethren surveyed their members to ascertain the current situation. These data represent the entire membership as each member and family is included. Unlike many other Christian denominations The Exclusive Brethren do not have marginal adherents or those who participate on an irregular basis. It will be argued that this very fact is part of the 'plausibility structure' of the group and that it has the additional effect of promoting family stability.

## The Data

The survey revealed that there are a total of 2,970 households of members of the Exclusive Brethren. Table One breaks these down into those households comprised of married couples with or without children, those comprised of widows and widowers with or without children and those with one previously married person with or without children. Children are accounted for separately.

Table One: Marriage Status of Exclusive Brethren in March 2006.

Total Marriages	2,970	100.0%
Married couples	2,602	87.6%
Widow/ers	302	10.2%
Divorced/Separated	66	2.2 %

These data reveal a high level of marriage and a focus on family life. However, in order to demonstrate the truth of this assessment, the Exclusive Brethren need to be compared with data available from other groups. The Census provides helpful information, but the Brethren data needs to be put in a form that makes the comparison possible. The census data are not household data but information about persons. Fortunately, given the completeness of the data provided by the survey of Exclusive Brethren it is possible to do this. The data provided include all Exclusive Brethren and therefore are as complete as the census. To make the data comparable the household data need to be converted to personal data and the number of unmarried persons 15 years and over need to be added. There are no married, widowed or divorced Exclusive Brethren under the age of 15. The total number of unmarried is 6,900. In consultation with the Exclusive Brethren the percentage of children/never married who are 15 years of age and older is estimated at 40%.

Table Two: Reconstruction of Survey Data to 'individual person data' to make comparisons possible.

Total Persons	12,472	Persons 15 years old and older	8,332	100.0%
Married couples	2,602	Married persons	5,204	62.5%
Widow/ers	302		302	3.6%
Divorced/Separated	66		66	0.8%
Children / Never Married	6,900	Children / never married 15 years old and over	2,760	33.1%

This reconstruction reveals a comparatively youthful religious group.

Assuming that most of the 'never married' are children it means that each family unit has on average 2.65 children. This is about twice the national average for Australian families. Again the evidence points to a strongly family focused group.

The data presented in Table Three make this assessment even clearer. When the Exclusive Brethren data are compared with the 2001 census report for all Brethren it becomes clear that the Exclusive Brethren demonstrate even more family stability than other Brethren. Moreover they exhibit much greater family stability than the Australian population and substantially more than two other Christian groups in Australia.

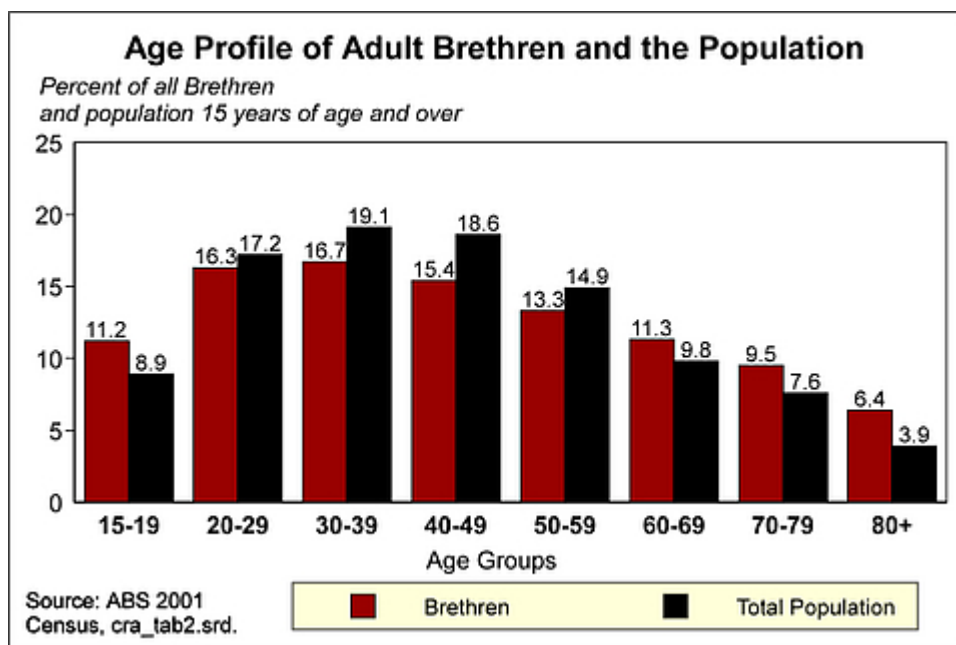
Table Three: Comparison of Exclusive Brethren with other Brethren, the Total Population, and selected Christian denominations.

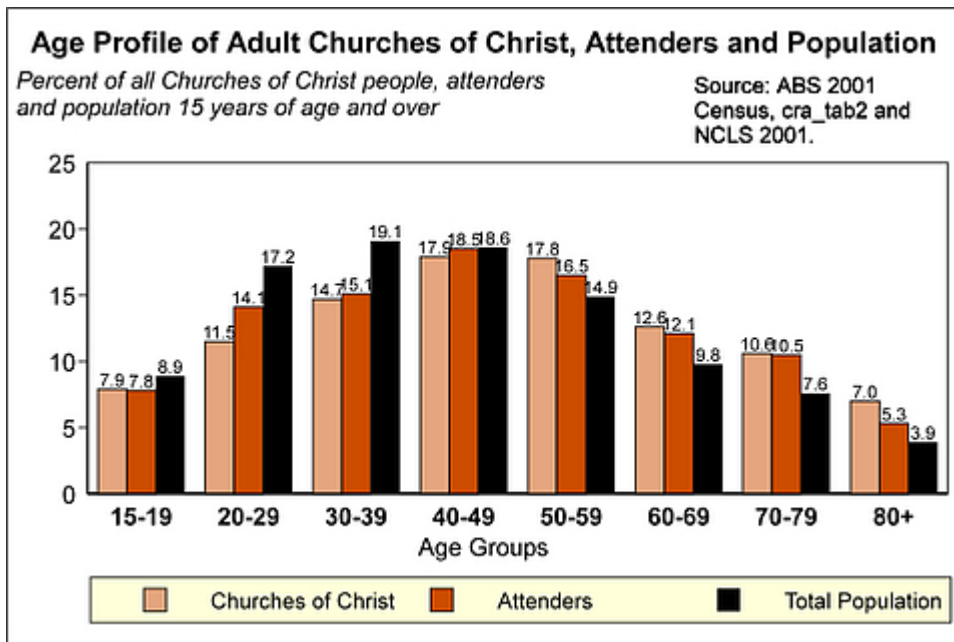
	Exclusive Brethren	Brethren in the Census	Total Population	Churches of Christ	Anglican
Married persons	62.5%	63.5%	51.4%	61.0%	53.9%
Widow/ers	3.6%	6.6%	6.2%	8.9%	8.5%
Divorced/Separated persons	0.8%	3.8%	10.8%	8.4%	12.0%
Children / Never Married	33.1%	26.1%	31.6%	21.6%	25.7%

Data from the March 2006 Exclusive Brethren Survey and from Phillip Hughes (Ed) *Australia's Religious Communities*. Melbourne: CRA 2004.

The Exclusive Brethren are distinctive among religious groups in that they have more children than many other religious groups but at a slightly greater rate than the national average.

The lower percentage of married and the higher percentage of those never married is a reflection of the fact that the Brethren have a comparatively youthful age profile. The census data confirm this. Compare the age profiles of The Brethren with the Churches of Christ in the following graphs taken from Phillip Hughes 2004.





Moreover, the comparison clearly demonstrates the very low rate of divorce among Exclusive Brethren. This family oriented group has an outstandingly low rate of divorced and separated persons. The percentage of Exclusive Brethren who are divorced or separated is minuscule when compared with other groups and the national average.

At a time when the mainstream Protestant churches have lost two generations of children the Exclusive Brethren tend to retain their children in active participation. The Exclusive Brethren Survey discovered that of 10,222 children born into Exclusive Brethren families, 9,789 or 95.8% continue in fellowship. A total number of 279 children have been involved in families that suffered divorce or separation. Of these 251 or 89.9% continue in fellowship. These data again show the high rate of retention among Exclusive Brethren.

Finally, the stability of family and marriage life is reflected in the fact that the group loses few members and basically gains members through birth and the 'restoration' of members that had been excommunicated. The Exclusive Brethren, like most Christian groups excommunicates members as a last resort. They do this in accordance with their interpretation of the bible. That excommunication is rare and in fact results in restoration in many cases is shown in the following data. In 2004 and 2005 a total of 43 members (0.17% per year) were excommunicated while in the same period 20 were 'restored'.

Most of these findings can be interpreted to describe a highly integrated and fully functioning religious community. It maintains belief through close association with others who share their beliefs. It structures the lives of families around activities of the community providing social life and support for distinctive beliefs. These social arrangements serve also to bolster family life and marital commitment.