

Brethren bid to cover up sex assaults on girls

Michael Bachelard
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THE Exclusive Brethren sect has tried for almost four years to cover up the sexual assaults of two girls, protecting the abuser, ostracising the victims and blaming their mother.

The perpetrator, a senior, respected and rich Brethren elder in a country town, was found guilty in a Sydney court two weeks ago of eight charges, including the digital rape of one girl of eight and the repeated indecent assault of her older sister.

The sect's world leader, Sydney office supply salesman Bruce Hales, was told of the assaults by Brethren elders in 2003 but no action was taken against the perpetrator at that time.

The Age has also obtained a document showing the Brethren leadership ignored written warnings as early as 1991 that the perpetrator, a serial molester, had sexually assaulted many young women in the sect.

The abuser has now been ejected from the Brethren and is in custody awaiting sentencing.

The Exclusive Brethren, a secretive Christian sect, has become notorious in recent years for running expensive advertising campaigns for conservative political parties.

They have successfully lobbied the federal Coalition Government and Prime Minister John Howard has admitted meeting their representatives. In New Zealand, the sect hired private detectives to tail Prime Minister Helen Clark, and cost the job of Nationals leader Don Brash when he denied accepting their money.

None of the parties in the recent sexual assault case can be identified for legal reasons, but the distraught father of the two girls has told *The Age* that in 2003, before the case was reported to police, the girls' mother came under intense pressure by the Brethren not to report the assaults to police.

"A local Brethren woman quoted the scripture to my ex-wife. She said: 'It would better for a millstone to be hung around your neck and for you to be cast into the depths of the sea rather than go to the police'."

According to the father, one of the Brethren's most senior Australian members also told the victims' mother that she should take the blame for the sexual assaults.

During this time, the wife of the sexual predator was allowed to interview the older sister for several hours. Towards the end of that session, the abuser himself also joined the interview. Under pressure, the girl was forced to retract her complaints and issue a written apology to her abuser and his wife.

"It was a coerced admission that it was because of my own daughter's naughtiness and sinfulness that she had said such a thing," the father said.

The retraction and apology was presented as evidence for the defence during the man's trial, but rejected by the jury.

Later that year, at the orders of the sect's leadership, two senior Brethren women grilled the girls for several hours. The results of this interview were reported to world leader Mr Hales.

These interviews later led police and the Director of Public Prosecutions to fear that the girls' evidence might have become too contaminated to secure a conviction, the father said.

Seeing the psychological effect the assaults and manipulation were having on her children, the mother wanted professional counselling for them. However, she was warned that a counsellor would be compelled to report the assaults to police.

This warning, and the hold the Brethren had over her, caused a further three-month delay in her seeking professional help for her traumatised daughters, the father said.

It was not until November 2003 that she reported the assaults. In February 2004, police arrested the perpetrator.

In Brethren theology, the "worldly" courts are inferior to their own "assembly".

Mr Hales, in words from April 2003 that were recorded and published, to be taken as gospel by the sect's 40,000 adherents, said it was "a very great matter, I think, to know that this place, the assembly, is the highest court". "It's the area of God's direct dealings, and it's got the power to overrule other judgements if there's a righteous basis for it," he said.

The father has seen copies of correspondence from 2004 in which the matter was discussed with Mr Hales.

In this period, the father was also tailed by a private investigator hired by the perpetrator.

The perpetrator offered to help the father in an unrelated matter if he was prepared to provide incriminating evidence against his ex-wife and daughters. He refused.

It was only after the charges were laid, and the court awarded an apprehended violence order against the perpetrator to keep him away from the family, that the Brethren imposed any "assembly discipline" on him, shutting the man out of worship.

"That set the scene for the vilification of my family," the father said. "The kids were excluded at school, jeered at, made fun of. And from that time ensued a period where my ex-wife's house was repeatedly egged — eggs under the doormat, being smashed on the windows, the car being scratched."

Under the pressure, one of the children of the family left the local school, which was owned and run by the sect.

At the first of two trials of the man, the Brethren trustee at the school, and its one-time principal, gave evidence on behalf of the abuser.

In early 2005, a Brethren member broke a lock on a filing cabinet to steal one of the girls' passports, while her mother was absent, apparently with the intention of sending the child overseas. The passport was returned after police were notified.

At this time, according to the girls' father, his former wife asked him: "Please protect me from the Brethren. I can't deal with the pressure they put me under right now".

In mid-2005, as the sexual assault case was being prepared, the Brethren's Sydney-based lawyers, Champion Legal, launched an unsuccessful legal attempt to wrest guardianship of one of the girls away from her parents.

Even then the campaign against the family did not cease. When the case finally came to court in October 2005, another adult Brethren member made bomb threats on the country courtroom where the charges were being heard.

He made phone calls threatening a suicide bomb mission on the court and another attack on the victims' home. These threats forced the evacuation of the court and a security upgrade.

While there is no evidence that the threats were endorsed by the Brethren leadership, police gave evidence that the man was a close friend of the perpetrator of the sexual assaults. He was jailed.

Other children of the family have also come under pressure. The father says another daughter, who was not abused, is no longer in the sect, but Brethren representatives have approached her with a number of offers to return: "money, clothes, trips to different places ... restorative surgery ... complete orthodontic work, all with the implication that her father wouldn't have the money or the decency to do it himself".

"If there's any money to be spent on martyrs and children, they'll spend it," he said.

All offers were dependent on the girl cutting contact with her father.

Champion Legal is now acting on behalf of the mother, who has returned to the Brethren fold. Through the firm, the Brethren has again tried to prevent details of this story emerging.

A legal letter threatens *The Age* that the sect will urge prosecution if this article identifies any party to the criminal case or their link to the Brethren.