

Forty years on: reflections

PETER FLINN

THE place: a small, austere meeting room in Canterbury, Melbourne. The day: July 12, 1970 - just on 40 years ago. The time: just after 6am on a dark, wintry Sunday morning.

That was the moment when I walked out of a meeting, and out of the only world I had ever known, never to return. It was the closed and tightly controlled world of the Exclusive Brethren, and I was 21 years old.

This was not like resigning from a club, or a political party. It was not just a decision to stop attending one church and changing to another. Rather, at that moment, one life ended and another began. It was that stark.

How had it come to this? After all, I had been born into the Brethren, a third generation member. The isolated lifestyle was familiar, with no worldly entertainment, no socialising with non-members and having to attend church meetings several times on Sundays and almost every other night of the week. That was normal. So what happened?

Disillusioned

To answer that, we need to go back to early 19th century Ireland, where a small and earnest group of Christians, disillusioned with the established church, began to meet in each other's homes to worship and study the Bible. Led by John Nelson Darby, a brilliant lawyer, biblical scholar and former Church of Ireland minister, this group rejected traditional church practices, especially the concept of an ordained clergyman.

By the 1840s, the Brethren movement had grown, with its focus in Plymouth.

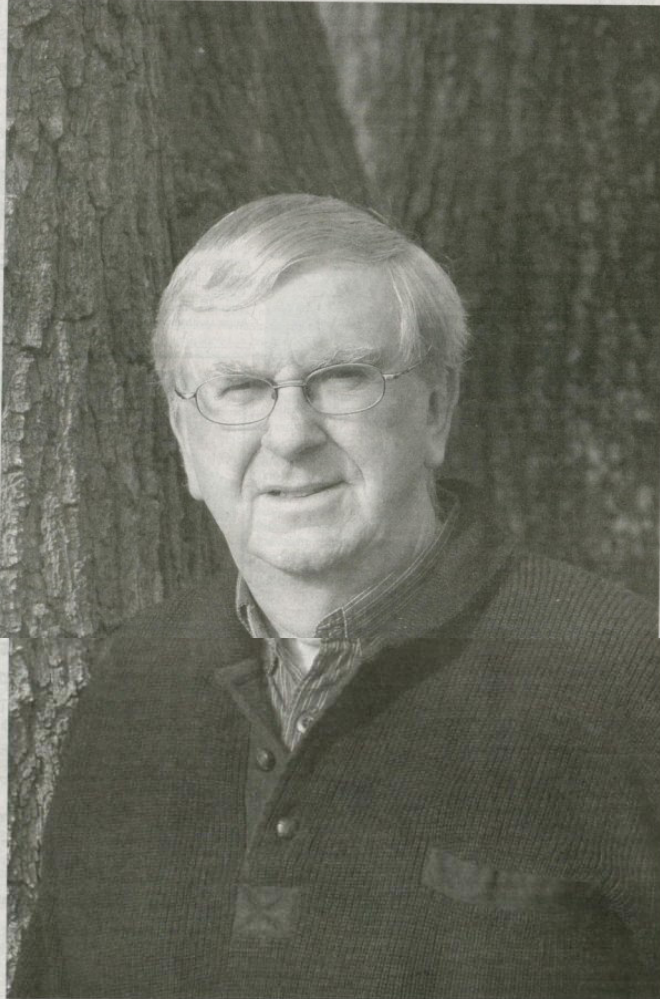
England: hence the term 'Plymouth Brethren'. However, Darby's increasingly extreme views on doctrine and behaviour resulted in a bitter power struggle, followed by the first of many major splits over the next century and beyond. The 'Exclusive' faction dates from this time, with 'separation from the world' and a centralised global leadership becoming fundamental to all its activities ever since.

Fast-forward to the 1950s, when there was a six-year power vacuum following the death of the then world leader. This corresponded with my primary school years and may explain the somewhat liberal state of affairs that prevailed, relative to what came later. I was free to play with my schoolmates and often visited my mother's relatives, who had never been in the Brethren. We even went on occasional holidays to the beach.

Abrupt end

All that came to an abrupt end around 1960, when a kind of 'Iron Curtain' descended. This coincided with James Taylor Jr, a quick-witted but aggressive New Yorker, emerging as leader instead of the mild-mannered English gentleman who many expected. It really amounted to a coup d'état. Exclusive Brethren seem to be attracted to strong and ruthless leaders, and Taylor immediately began a reign of terror, which affected every Brethren gathering across the world.

Rigid separation was strictly enforced. No member could even have a cup of tea with a non-member. Families were split where one member was 'in' and another was 'out'. No-one could be a member of a trade union or other association. The old welcome signs on Brethren halls, inviting anyone to attend a gospel preaching, were taken down. Children's pets, holidays, novels and of course TV and radio were banned. There were regular purges, when people had to publicly confess their sins. Ex-communication was



REFLECTING... Peter Flinn reflects on another life.

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frequent and sudden. The victim would be utterly shunned, losing contact with family and friends, sometimes even a house or job. I had to sit through such events as a teenager, and they haunt me to this day.

I will always remember seeing my mother on the phone to her non-Brethren relatives, telling them, in tears, that we could no longer visit. As a 12-year-old, I was horrified and confused, but obviously had to go with the flow. There was another split in the ranks in 1961, with many leaving and setting up a breakaway group, which became known as the 'Seceders', a word I did not understand at the time, but which I thought sounded rather sinister!

Tough and lonely

The 1960s was a decade I would rather forget - as indeed I tried to do for the next 30 years. Being almost the only Brethren member in a high school of 800 kids was tough and lonely. I

was a frequent target of ridicule due to negative press publicity which covered harrowing family court cases caused by 'separation' issues. I even recall being singled out in a history class as a modern day Puritan when learning about life in Cromwell's England. I had to walk out of Religious Instruction classes, and competitive sport, excursions and speech nights were out. The honours certificate I gained one year was just handed to me by a teacher next day. Life consisted totally of study and Brethren meetings, and the 60s passed me by.

At least I was able to obtain a tertiary education - one of the last Brethren members to do so. University has since been banned. Still, I faced a virtual inquisition about membership of the student union, which was compulsory for all students but unacceptable to the Exclusive Brethren. I requested that my name be left off the list of members, but I still paid the fee. This

did not satisfy the hard-liners, but I insisted - with parental support - that I had a clear conscience.

Rebellious

By the late 1960s, I was becoming rebellious by Brethren standards. Young men were expected to take part in the meetings, but also to stand up and 'preach'. I refused. The growing number of bizarre edicts being introduced by the 'Man of God' troubled me. I even stopped attending some meetings, receiving occasional visits from the local 'Attendance Officer', whose job it was to find out why. The whispers, suspicious looks and public hints were becoming more frequent.

1969 was a watershed year. It was my final year of study. I turned 21, my mother was seriously ill and there were two deaths in the family. One of my father's three single sisters, aged 76, was hit by a car and killed, and six weeks later my grandfather died. The

Brethren were convinced that God was sending me a message. "Things don't happen by chance", I was told.

Dealing with death under the Taylor regime was confronting. The body of the deceased had to be kept at home pending burial, and at the funeral everyone had to file past the open coffin. The graveside service, in front of a large gathering, was expected to be conducted by a male relative of the deceased. At both of these deaths, this task fell to my father. However, he was quite ill himself at the time and could not cope either physically or emotionally. As a 20-year-old, I did it, receiving rare Brethren approval. I grew up rather quickly that year.

Gathering pace

New developments in Brethren life were gathering pace. The communion service, or the Lord's Supper, was the most important meeting of the week, and suddenly - world-wide - it had to take place at 6am on Sundays. This caused inconvenience and disruption to young families and elderly folk alike, but objections were unthinkable. Meetings run by Taylor often became chaotic. Once-serious bible readings descended into farce. He fancied himself as a wit, with ribald jokes and laughter becoming more frequent. This behaviour later escalated into a major scandal in Aberdeen, Scotland, which triggered another split in the ranks. However the whole episode was hushed up in Australia.

In March 1970, Taylor suddenly insisted that all Brethren women, of whatever age, were to let their long hair flow freely and wear head-scarves.

The practice continues to this day. My mother was horrified, and refused to comply, but the vast majority did. Thus it became obvious who was following the 'Man of God' and who was not.

Had enough

By winter 1970, I was completely disillusioned. I could see that Taylor and other notables had feet of clay after all. It was all wrong and I had had enough. I even contemplated the unimaginable: what if I left the Brethren? By this time I had a diploma and a job, so I was relatively financially independent. I was still single, with no brothers or sisters to pressure me, and my parents and I were in agreement about how dreadful things had become. But still I hesitated: this would be a life-changing decision and the consequences would be dire. I would be thrust into the Big Bad World outside, and according to Brethren folklore, I would fall into evil and ruin.

So what was the final trigger, on that fateful winter Sunday morning? This is extremely difficult to explain, but here goes. Rumours were circulating that the long-held biblical teaching "let your women be silent in the assemblies" was about to be relaxed by Taylor, and that the 'sisters' could now propose a hymn to be sung. This was radical! It undermined a pillar of Brethren belief and tradition, and was the last straw. I vowed that if I witnessed such a happening, I would immediately walk out forever. And so it was: I entered the meeting room at 6am, sat down and waited. The first voice to be heard was a sisters; as if on cue, she 'gave out' a hymn. I got up, walked out and went home. The deed was done.

I have never spoken of this publicly before, and church-goers today may well brand me an arrogant male chauvinist. And why would I reject a whole lifestyle and take this irrevocable step over something so apparently trivial? .

SATURDAY MAGAZINE

on another life long gone

Word of God

But in the Brethren context, this was not trivial. The bible had always been held up as the absolute Word of God and governed everything. Life was simple and straightforward: black or white, good or evil, in or out, for or against. Compromise was the utmost evil and there could be no shades of grey. But now, if Mr Taylor said black was white, of course it must be. What he said outweighed the bible.

Later that day the visits started. I was asked why I had walked out. My reply was clear: Mr Taylor was wrong. I completely disagreed with the way the Brethren were heading and I wanted no more part of it. I had left and that was the end of it. They did not argue, question or plead. They could see I was a lost cause. Later that week I was summarily 'withdrawn from'. In their eyes I was a pariah, an apostate.

Did I have regrets? Of course I did. The feelings of guilt and self-doubt persisted for years. The reality of the consequences quickly sank in. The only community I really knew, including relatives and friends, I never saw again. The visits to our home continued - not to see me, but my parents, who were officially still 'in'. The strategy was obvious: persuade my parents to stay and hence put pressure on me to repent. I felt bad about my parents being harassed, as both were unwell and under severe stress. However, they backed me up and soon left as well. Our small family remained intact.

Close to aunts

The hardest thing was not ever seeing my elderly aunts again - my father's two remaining single sisters. We had always been very close to them, and the loss of their sister in the tragic accident a year earlier had hit them hard. Two years later, when my mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer, I wrote to my aunts. No reply. When she died, in February 1973, I wrote to them again. Still no reply. We were alone. When my aunts eventually died, we were informed in one-line telegrams, in each case after they had been buried. We were never told where, but through the internet I finally discovered the location of my favourite aunt's grave only last December. Then, almost 20 years after her death, I stood beside her grave, in Adelaide, for the first time. I don't mind admitting I shed a tear.

Soon after my departure from the Brethren, I successfully applied for a job as chemist with the Agriculture Department at Hamilton, and moved here in early 1971. This was the first time I had ever left home, and after boarding with wonderful people in the Woodhouse soldier settler community for several months, my parents sold up in Melbourne and we made our home at Dunkeld, where I have lived ever since. Marriage and children followed, I did my best to forget the Exclusive Brethren, and life has been good.

Going public

So what happened? Why am I going public after all these years? Like many ex-members, I have been shattered to see the barrage of negative media publicity about the Brethren over recent years. This started in earnest around 2004 following their unprecedented involvement in politics in several countries. Despite traditionally never voting in elections, they suddenly embarked on a well-coordinated political advertising campaign, but without identifying themselves as the group behind it. The media scrutiny which followed uncovered other controversial activities of this secretive sect. Politicians and the public were deeply disturbed to

hear the horrific experiences of families forced apart by the Brethren practice of extreme separation. Blind obedience to a succession of tyrannical world leaders who unleashed almost Stalinist-style purges has left a legacy of severe emotional stress, mental breakdown, financial ruin and sometimes even suicide.

Suddenly, a lot of the old memories came flooding back. I was once part of this sect, and I felt sad, ashamed and angry, but also with something akin to 'survivor guilt'. Through the internet I established contact with other ex-members, some of whom I had not seen for over 30 years. I was convinced of the need for action. The public must be made aware that there is a much darker history behind this seemingly harmless and secluded group of Christians and business people. I feel some responsibility to assist and seek justice for other survivors who have done it much harder than I have. There is also a crucial need to provide help and refuge to any brave souls who try to escape from the Brethren system.

Get what they want

Obviously this can be risky. The Exclusive Brethren have shown many times that they will use whatever financial and legal means are necessary

to get what they want. This could be funding for their controversial schools, council approval for building their fortress-like meeting halls despite frequent objections from adjacent residents, or relentlessly fighting family court cases to prevent a parent who is no longer a member of the sect from obtaining access to his or her children.

The Brethren are always quick to cry foul when they are criticised, accusing those concerned of 'religious vilification'. This tends to worry politicians, who are understandably very sensitive about the basic right to freedom of religion in a democracy. However, this important freedom should not interfere with other equally important rights such as freedom of expression and the rights of families and children.

One remarkable recent development is that the Brethren have engaged a major Australian public relations company to help them improve their very tarnished public image. This would have been unthinkable only a few years ago. The attempt at positive spin was recently evident in Victoria, with the Brethren making a huge donation to the Bushfire Appeal, and their Glenvale School producing a glossy book about Black Saturday, the profits targeted at CFA

Brigades in fire-affected areas. This will be considered laudable by many, but such charitable actions towards 'outsiders' were unheard of in the past, and signify a new strategy.

Public image

Ironically, this same PR company, according to its website, also has the Church of Scientology as a client. Both organisations are now regarded by many as cults, and both apparently crave a more favourable public image. In my view, they both face an uphill battle.

Let me emphasise that I am not conducting a vendetta against the Exclusive Brethren. After all, the Brethren form part of my heritage, whether I like it or not, and I still have relatives amongst them, many of whom I have never seen. They are as entitled as any other group to meet together in freedom to follow their beliefs. However I reserve the right to stand up against tyranny and injustice when it is clearly practised by an organisation claiming to be Christian but acting in a manner anything but Christian. I will also try to support the victims of Brethren cruelty and oppression in any way I can.

Like Martin Luther King, I have a dream. A dream in which the current

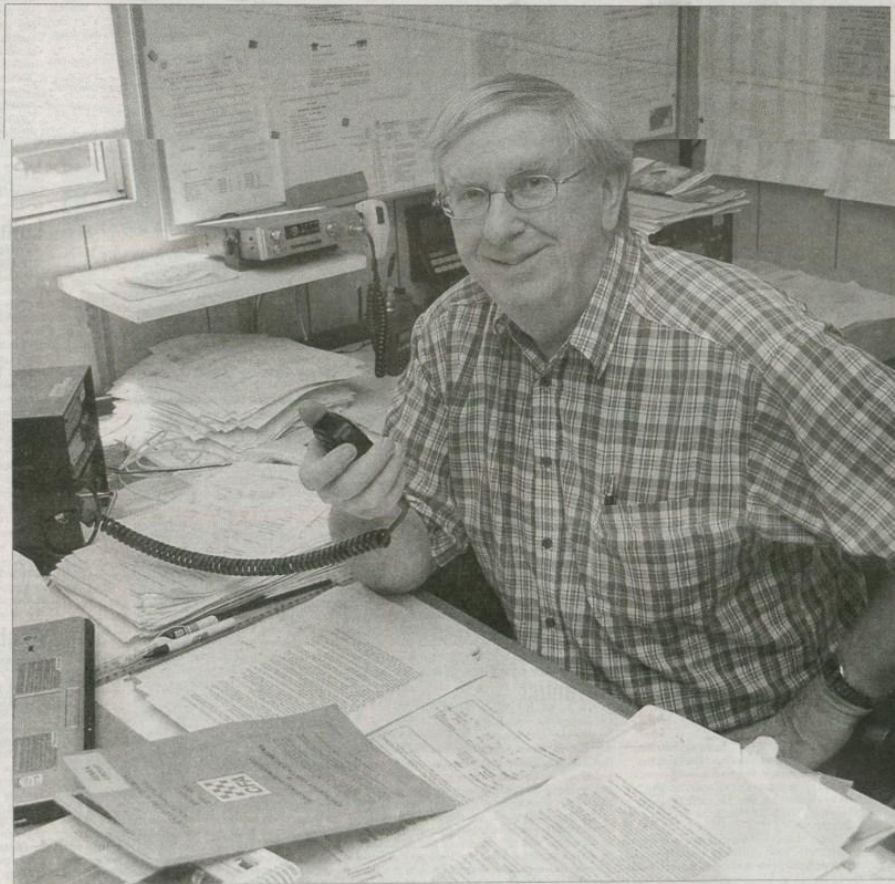
Brethren leadership acknowledges the dreadful damage done to so many individuals and families across the world over 50 years, and opens the door for re-unification, with no strings attached. A dream in which the Exclusive Brethren positively engage with the outside world, broaden their horizons and encourage their children to receive a full education commensurate with their capabilities.

A dream

At present, this remains a dream, but while I draw breath I will work with others towards making it a reality, however hopeless the outlook. After all, unlikely events do happen. Who would ever have predicted the sudden demise of the Berlin Wall?

Meanwhile, the Exclusive Brethren are now firmly established in Hamilton, with two meeting halls, several businesses and a campus of Glenvale School. I could never have imagined this when I arrived here nearly 40 years ago. Still, it is a useful reminder of the old saying: "There, but for the grace of God, go I!"

July 12, 2010 is an important anniversary for me. It is a time for quiet and sober reflection, but also to be thankful for being able to start a new life in this wonderful part of Victoria.



VOLUNTEER . . . Peter Flinn is heavily involved in the CFA in Dunkeld.

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