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Sect member charged with child sex offences

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AN ELDERLY Exclusive Brethren man who is a former church leader and trustee of a Queensland Brethren private school, has been charged with sexual offences against a child.

It is the third case of alleged sexual abuse of children to emerge from the secretive sect in the past 12 months, but church elders deny any pattern of behaviour. And the hierarchy of the church has denied any prior knowledge of the alleged abuse by the Queensland man.

"[World leader] Bruce Hales has never been aware of this until *The Age* wrote to me," a spokesman, Tony McCorkell, said. "I can clearly say to you that Mr Hales did not know about this, and has not sought to cover it up."

Once they became aware of the allegations, sect leaders interviewed the alleged victims and perpetrator, then immediately handed the case over to police.

The man, who cannot be named for legal reasons, was charged on October 30 by a regional Queensland court with two counts of indecent treatment of a child under 16.

He has been confined in his home by the sect, has been barred from attending church services, and will be "withdrawn from" [excommunicated] shortly.

The offences he has been charged over allegedly occurred in 2003 and relate to one young child. But the police are investigating other alleged offences involving several other victims, as far back as the 1970s and 1980s.

Police would not comment.

The *Herald* has been told the man was at one time a highly respected elder of the church who had fallen out of favour in recent years. He had been a trustee of the local Brethren secondary school.

"He was probably the most actively involved of all the board members in any of the campuses," a former Queensland teacher said.

It is understood none of the offences are alleged to have occurred at the school.

Clive Petrie, an excommunicated Brethren man, will appear in court in New Zealand soon facing six indecent assault charges. Late last year an Albury man, Lindsay Jensen, was sent to jail over a series of indecent assaults against two young sisters.

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