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MAINLANDER STORY

A Brethren castaway

21 October 2006

Doug Field's family is split down the middle - some in the Exclusive Brethren and others cast out. Now the church is proffering money and regrets. SARAH BOYD reports.

Doug Field no longer believes in God but he can rattle off scripture like the Brethren boy he once was. He'd like to say to church leaders: "A man shall know when his ways pleaseth the Lord, for even his enemies shall be at peace with him."

His point is that the Exclusive Brethren church – he prefers the term cult – has failed to make peace with those who leave or are kicked out. Instead, it takes away their jobs, cuts them adrift from families and friends, and condemns them as headed to hell.

Doug Field is now a 35-year-old solo dad, a shambling chap with shaggy hair, a ready bark of laughter and an appealing openness. He lives in a farmhouse on a sunny spot above the Nelson settlement of Wakefield, sharing a sparse rented room

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LOST OPPORTUNITIES: Doug Field is angry the Exclusive Brethren church condemns people who leave its fold and forbids contact with their families.

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with his 11-year-old son. He's on the DPB and money's tight.

So when, after five years silence, he was visited by church members, told he'd been wrongly treated and offered money, he took it. It was several thousand dollars, a loan rather than a gift and money he believes came from his own family members still in the church.

He's not the only one to be approached. In the glare of bad publicity in several countries, the Exclusive Brethren leadership has moved to, in its parlance, "put things right" with former members.

Known as the review, it's been carried out by local members – in Field's case one of his brothers was among the visitors.

But he's been left with the impression it's little more than a push to get people back in the fold and for church members to salve their own consciences.

"Nothing has been put right with me and none of my concerns have been addressed."

In an effort to distance itself, the upper echelons of the church appear to be having local church members claim that cases were misrepresented to the hierarchy, making local leaders take the rap.

Two cases supposedly misrepresented involved two of Doug Field's brothers, who had dramatic, well-publicised battles with the church in the 1990s.

Stan Field and his former wife, Julia, left their children with their Exclusive Brethren grandparents while they tried to resolve marriage difficulties, then had a huge custody dispute to get them back. The couple eventually fled to Australia with the children but the marriage later broke up.

Now Doug Field says his brother Stan has received a substantial payment from the Exclusive Brethren.

Another brother, Simon, was jailed when he broke into a sports store, took a gun and entered the home of the local Nelson Exclusive Brethren leader, demanding the church release his brother's children. He'd seen his own marriage break up, which he blamed on pressure from the church on his young wife.

Now he, too, has been given money, understood to be several hundred thousand dollars and enough to buy some land. Both brothers have signed confidentiality agreements.

Doug Field has not. He regrets taking any money himself, although he believes his financial situation and lack of job prospects are largely a legacy of his Exclusive Brethren upbringing.

Field talks about the anger he's felt and he hams it up, showing an angry fist to the photographer. Among the papers he has stuffed in an old cardboard box is an abusive letter to a former church leader, and he says he once yelled at the same person in the street.

He reckons he's calmed down a lot lately and certainly there's a gentle quality about him. It rings true when he says he would never do anything that jeopardised custody of his son. But there are still some things he can never forgive.

"The worst year of my life," he says of the time when, aged 10, he and his brother were taken away from their parents to live with another Exclusive Brethren family.

His parents had been kicked out of the church and were deemed not worthy to keep their children.

When their younger brother started at their school, they were warned by church members not to talk to him. The school had two playgrounds and he remembers straining to catch a glimpse of the little brother he hadn't seen for months in the lower area.

"We were taken without warning, we didn't even know where we were going. That was it. I never saw my parents for a whole year until, just as surprisingly, they were deemed to be OK again and we went back."

Later, he learned his parents had contemplated leaving the church for good at that stage; he wishes they had. Instead, they were reinstated.

The ties were too strong. His father was born into an Exclusive Brethren family, his mother was not but came from a broken family herself and welcomed the embrace of the church. They had eight sons, of whom four are still in the church along with their mother, while four have left.

It's the religion and its harsh attitude to people who leave that has caused the split, he says. "We would be a primo family. We all get on well, we're all musical. My brothers who are still in the church – there's nothing I don't like about them. It's completely because of the Brethren rules."

His father died about 18 months ago. One of Field's brothers in the church rang offering him five minutes alone at the graveside, if he came at a particular time. He declined.

Now, he says, all he wants is to sit down and have a meal with his mother, to chat like an ordinary mother and son. He still has the reply she sent to a Mother's Day card a few years ago, urging him to repent: "You may not intend to go far Doug, but once Satan has his foot in the door, he'll take you further than you intend to go."

Still he loves her. "My ultimate dream and my goal is not for the church to crumble, but for the hierarchy to relax its rules on having to do with ex-members."

Brethren life was all he knew as a child and he went along with it for years, pushing against the boundaries where he could. In church terms he was a rebel, by ordinary standards a child with spirit.

He remembers going to the toilet at a particular time every night, perching binoculars on the open louvre windows, standing on the toilet lid and watching a TV show through the neighbour's window.

He used to tell his mother he was going for a swim after school, but instead he'd sneak off to a friend's to watch videos of parachuting, which he loved. After about half an hour he'd wet his hair and dash back.

He was caught out once and his case discussed in humiliating fashion at a church meeting, including detailed questions about whether the tapes were pornographic.

'My ultimate dream and my goal is not for the church to crumble, but for the hierarchy to relax its rules on having to do with ex- members.'

-Doug Field, who grew up Exclusive Brethren, and still has family within the church

The first recorded music he ever heard was when he spied a broken tape glittering on the road. He painstakingly wound it up again, threaded it onto an old cassette tape and listened to it surreptitiously. He later found out it was Joe Cocker.

He and his brothers would sneak into a music store while his mother was in the supermarket, leaving one on guard. Back at home, they'd have to wait for their parents to go out to play it.

The days were crammed, what with church meetings every night and five on a Sunday – "it was basically just an all-day churchathon and SO BORING!" he says, the frustration still raw.

He remembers being preoccupied with loads of petty rules – "you're so busy and tired you don't have time to worry about your life being s... ."

Money wasn't a problem, as there was always the opportunity for well- paid work after school in Brethren businesses. There was little they were allowed to buy. One of the few things was alcohol – in his teenage years he drank heavily.

Exclusive Brethren now have their own schools and he's pleased he got to go to a state school – "that's what saved my life really, going to school and having to do with ordinary people".

He lied about his course work so he could take media studies and muck around with cameras. But he was not allowed to do sport past a certain level or have anything to do with computers, and he had the dorkiest haircut in the class.

Field was fascinated with planes but dreams of being a pilot were quickly stamped on: Brethrens cannot do that because it relies on using radios.

"I was a bit artistic-y, so I thought maybe I could do something like signwriting. But no, I was told there was an opening in a logging gang. That was it, I had no choice."

So he'd start work early and have to go to meetings every night, including once a week out of town in Blenheim or Motueka.

Stuck in a job he hated, by age 17 he was extremely unhappy and thinking of breaking free of the church. Then the family home burned down and they lost everything, including his treasured model planes.

"I thought maybe God was speaking to me. We all nearly died – it was a big guilt thing that actually stopped me thinking about going. I ended up staying in the church and getting married."

That marriage was to later fail and now his son lives with him and his daughter with his ex-wife. That's not something he particularly blames on the church, although he thinks many relationships come under enormous strain behind close doors because of church rules.

Contraception is banned, for example, and they'd scarcely been married for a year before a Brethren sister questioned his wife closely on whether she was using it.

"If I achieved nothing more in my life and I died tomorrow, I would rest in peace knowing that my ex-wife and my daughter will never be subservient Exclusive Brethren wives," he says.

He recently added it up and realised he and his former wife spent about eight hours together in total before they were married, none of it on their own. They'd never so much as kissed, and when he flew up to Tauranga to be married, it had been nine months since he had last seen her.

Unsurprisingly, they discovered they had little in common. But not before going through the terrible process of being thrown out of the church both had grown up in.

The young couple got into trouble for missing a few meetings but, in the end, the reason given for them being kicked out of the church was "adulterous conduct".

It's not what it sounds like, Field says. They had been seeing a couple, friends who had been withdrawn from the church. But according to Field, the church needed to shroud the case in a seedy sexual context, so they implied there was some kind of adulterous goings-on.

They were "shut up", which means they weren't allowed to attend church or associate with members. After that their withdrawal was formalised. He lost his job with a day's notice and family members within the church severed ties.

Fortunately, his older brother Simon had already been out of the church for some time and he took them away camping.

"We'd never done it before – if you have a meeting every day you can't do it. We honestly thought we'd won Lotto."

His wife was still anxious, however, so he promised they would try being out for six months and go back after that if she wanted to. He tried to make it a great six months – they made new friends, she got to wear makeup and jewellery for the first time.

After their marriage split up, his ex-wife's parents, who were staunch church members, tried everything they could to get her to return home with the two children. "To her great credit there was no way."

Though they parted amicably, they did have a custody dispute over the children and that's added to his financial woes. Again, he's not blaming the church for everything.

What he regrets are lost opportunities. He'd like to be sitting there on the other side, snapping the photos.

Yet he reckons he's lucky, particularly having the support of brothers on the outside.

"That's why I'm a good one to speak out, because I don't have a huge grudge that affects my view of them.

"Ninety-five per cent of Brethren are absolutely lovely people – the problem is the hierarchy and the rules."

–Dominion Post

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