

27 March 2005



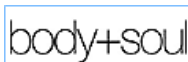
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Old-time religion

KAY DIBBEN chief reporter
27mar05

THEY are intensely private people who have turned their backs on the modern world, believing its trappings to be evil.

Members of the religious group known as The Brethren do not own televisions or radios, nor do they attend cinemas and theatres.

It is rare for them to live in an apartment building alongside non-members and they are barred from joining clubs and associations, including unions.

Women, who cannot preach or pray aloud at services, use headscarves to cover their hair and wear long skirts and no makeup. The men usually attend church in white shirts and long pants and are forbidden from growing beards.

And although young Brethren were once allowed to attend universities, tertiary education is now frowned upon.

"We don't go in for higher education – it's so polluted," a Brisbane Brethren trustee told *The Sunday Mail*. "Most of our folks seem to be able to make a living fairly easily."

While the fellowship members shun public attention, they were forced to reveal aspects of their world to a Queensland court recently.

In order to win back a rate exemption on a Brisbane property where they hold services, trustees had to prove to the Supreme Court that members of the public could, on occasions, attend their Bolan St, Bulimba, meeting-room services.

Although accepting the Brethren as a religious group, Brisbane City Council had refused them a rate exemption since 1996 and hit them with a \$400,000 bill.

The Brethren trustees bought the Bulimba land in Brisbane's southeast – the site of the city's largest meeting room – from the council in 1978, on condition that it be used as "a place of public worship".

But in 1999 a council officer decided the meeting room was only used for "private congregational worship".

The court case revealed an almost Amish lifestyle followed by the Brethren in Brisbane, where there are 14 meeting rooms and about 500 members.

The Brethren, who have been known as Plymouth Brethren and Exclusive

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Brethren, was founded in Ireland in the early 19th century by Irish curate John Darby.

Sydney man Bruce Hales is now the world leader of the group, which is believed to have more than 70,000 members worldwide.

The Brethren, who live according to Mr Darby's translation of the Holy Bible, have no ordained ministers, although there are elders.

Followers believe they must separate themselves from evil and anyone sinful.

People outside the fellowship are often referred to as "worldlies", or even "worldly Christians".

"We insist on a standard of moral integrity which is not generally accepted by modern society," said fellowship member Ralph Cooper in a statement to the court.

Brethren usually marry within the fellowship. Those who stray from the path, through immoral or sinful practices, can be excluded or ex-communicated.

"If somebody goes bad we separate from that," Bulimba fellowship trustee Stuart Jensen said.

"But it's extremely rare. As soon as they get on the straight and narrow, they're back."

Mr Cooper told the court: "That is something that occurs rarely, as we see necessary, with one who is persisting in wickedness and refuses all exhortations and appeals to mend their ways."

The children of Brisbane's Brethren are allowed to attend primary schools, but then they must go to the Brethren's high school in southside Norman Park.

While the Brethren are allowed to read newspapers, they live without mod-cons including computers, faxes and mobile phones.

"We don't normally go in for those things," Mr Jensen said.

Usually they work and run businesses together, but also employ non-Brethren.

Members will not voluntarily join the military service, or any profession that requires compulsory membership of a union or association.

The Brethren hit the headlines in Melbourne in the 1960s during a family feud over an estate between a fellowship member and non-member relatives of a man who had left the group.

There also have been cases involving Brethren trying to exempt their businesses from workplace laws.

On some Sundays, up to 800 members from all over Brisbane, Ipswich, Toowoomba, Caboolture and the Sunshine Coast attend services at the Bulimba meeting room.

They are held in a large, windowless, airconditioned building resembling an industrial warehouse, which is capable of holding up to 1200.

"We believe that the assembly is a heavenly vessel, that the occasions are solemn and holy occasions together, and we do not wish any

distraction to exist," Mr Cooper told the court.

Doors are locked once the service starts, but the fellowship says there is a call button that people can press if they want to enter.

Once a service is in progress, usually the gates to the grounds are padlocked.

The court was told visitors were welcome as long as they were "well-disposed" towards the group, not affected by alcohol, not looking to make trouble and appropriately dressed.

Justice Debra Mullins visited the Bulimba meeting room during a two-day hearing late last year.

The court was told Brethren members preached the "gospel of salvation" in the streets of Brisbane, inviting people to attend the Brethren's meeting room.

Signs at entrances to the property declare that the meeting room is a "place of public religious worship" and there is a phone number to call for meeting information.

But two council officers who had secretly posed as members of the public told of difficulties they had in trying to attend meetings there in late 1998 and early 1999.

Each Sunday morning at 6am, The Lord's Supper service is held at the Bulimba meeting room – for fellowship members only.

But at 9.30am up to 800 people attend the Reading of the Scriptures for an hour, then the Preaching of the Gospel for 30 to 45 minutes.

Other services are held each day of the week.

Justice Mullins decided that other than the members-only Lord's Supper service, there were other services the public could attend.

On March 18, she set aside the council's decision to refuse the rate exemption and declared the property a place of public worship.

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