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## Sect told girl: banish your dad



Bruce Hales and his family in a photo taken about 12 years ago.

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THE world leader of the Exclusive Brethren church intervened personally to break up a family this year, telling a 12-year-old that she would lose her mother if she did not renounce her father.

The Sydney-based Bruce D. Hales - the "Man of God," or "Elect Vessel" of the separatist cult - urged the girl to cease contact with her father, saying: "Your mother will not be able to accept you if you continue contact with him."

Notes of the conversation, taken immediately after they met in Sydney in January, also reveal Mr Hales told the girl: "You cannot love Christ if you wear pants [jeans], and you cannot be a Christian if you leave the Brethren."

And documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act demonstrate the Brethren's efforts over 15 years to bend the Family Court and the Federal Government to its will, in the hope of keeping lapsed Brethren away from their children.

After the January 17 meeting between Mr Hales and the girl, the mother - with the help of the church - moved the girl, her sister and brother 700 kilometres away from their father. He has not seen them since.

"My ex-wife went from having daily contact and decision-making involving me to nothing, just like closing a door," said the father, who has spoken on condition of anonymity. "It happened immediately after Mr Hales said that."

The Family Court has granted him joint guardianship of the children and guaranteed weekly access, but these conditions have been ignored.

His children had told him they were lured to the January meeting, at which another senior Brethren member, Neil Kennard, a Sydney businessman, was present, under the promise of an apology and a gift of money. But the church wanted to keep the father away from them because he had ceased being a member in 1999. However, he had been living with, or near, the girls and his former wife, at her invitation, through most of last year because she was ill and was dealing with unrelated legal proceedings.

During this time, he said, she had repeatedly said to him: "Please protect me from the Brethren. I can't deal with the pressure they put on me." He has kept notes and letters from his former wife thanking him for his help.

The Brethren enforce a strict policy of separation from the world: those who are "not in fellowship" are to have no contact with sect members, even if they are members of their family.

Mr Hales and Mr Kennard responded to interview requests with a flurry of legal correspondence, confirming that a meeting took place with the girl, but saying "all persons present ... do not agree with the allegation that Mr B Hales broke up the ... family".

"[The father] left his family in desolate and dire straits." Another letter claims Mr Hales made "a number of attempts to assist the parties in reconciling" since 1999.

But the Exclusive Brethren has become notorious for its desire to break up families when one member falls out of favour with the church, or leaves it. *The Age* has obtained correspondence between the Brethren and the former Family Court chief justice Alastair Nicholson and the Attorney-General, Philip Ruddock, in which it tries to persuade them to favour the sect in family disputes.

The documents show that in 1991 and again in 2002 groups of Brethren marriage celebrants wrote to Chief Justice Nicholson to complain that they were being mistreated by judges in his court.

Both letters demand that the court refuse custody and access to the parent who has left the Brethren, most often the husband.

The July 1991 letter argues that giving any access to the non-Brethren parent causes trauma to the children because of their "diametrically opposed lifestyle".

"The welfare of the children is best preserved by being maintained within the lifestyles and belief systems which they have been brought up in since birth," the Brethren argues.

It says the Brethren lifestyle is better than that of "worldly" people because women stay in the home. "The cornerstone of a healthy society is the regulation of order in the family home in accordance with the creatorial status of man and woman. Numerous social studies confirm the enduring value of the dedication of the mother to the home setting and the tender care of children."

Brethren women are required to wear long skirts, no make-up, and have their hair long, with headscarves. They are not permitted to work once married.

In another letter sent in May 2002 the Brethren representatives argue that in every custody case the children want to live with the Brethren parent and "refrain from contact" with the parent who has left the sect. Where the court has ordered contact, "the conflict has always been very severe, emotionally traumatic, and damaging", and the children have "ultimately themselves terminated the contact and remain among the Brethren".

A member leaving the sect knows he "immediately forfeits any rights to the continuance of family relationships".

For children, the "stress from the anticipation of contact [visits] is evidenced by anxiety, tension, emotional effects such as bed-wetting and sleeplessness, nightmares and outbursts of frustration".

"On returning, children often evidence remorse where they have been forced to participate in activities, or have been taken to places which they have protested as to not being suitable to their way of life." Such activities include watching TV, listening to the radio, or using computers, which they consider "conduits of evil".

"It is well-recognised that a child of eight years normally has a moral judgement of right and wrong and knows who can be trusted and who they are uneasy with. Their instincts should be respected."

In their letters to Justice Nicholson, the Brethren representatives said: "There is no pressure brought to bear on any member." They also said that, where courts order access, those orders are respected, but *The Age* has collected abundant evidence that the sect flouts access orders and denies the rights of parents to see their children. It has also seen a number of letters written by young children to their fathers accusing them of being evil.

Brethren members who have left the church say their children have been schooled by sect elders to spit at their fathers, throw stones, and to say they do not want to see them on access visits. Vincent Field remembers very well the psychological pressure put on him as an eight-year-old to reject his parents. He, his brother and sister were moved to their grandparents' house after his mother and father were "withdrawn from" in 1990.

"There is a point where you actually start to believe that because your parents 'aren't right with the Lord' that you don't want to see them," Mr Field said. "It's continually reiterated by all the people in the church, especially when they pray in their meetings. They're careful not to say they're evil: they say they're 'not right', and then you'd read some Bible scriptures saying those who aren't right with the Lord are evil and wicked and you'd make the connection.

"I know first hand that initially we would have loved to see our parents, but just the methodical phrases and the way they talk about your parents made you not want to."

A psychologist, Louise Samways, said many in the Family Court system did not understand the "ferocity of the fear planted in these children" by fundamentalist sects such as the Brethren.

"They teach that people outside are condemned to hell, and if you want to be saved you're not allowed to associate with people outside the group. They use the expression 'of the devil'," Ms Samways said.

"From a child's point of view, to be told they have to spend time with the parent who is of the devil is an extremely frightening prospect ... it's definitely psychological abuse. If you undermine a parent to a child, say that parent is of the devil, there you see abuse, there is no doubt about it."

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