

[Home](#) » [National](#) » Article

Brethren chief tells girl to disown dad

Michael Bachelard
December 26, 2006

THE world leader of the Exclusive Brethren church intervened personally to break up a family earlier this year, threatening a 12-year-old girl by saying she should renounce her father or lose her mother.

The Age has learned that the Sydney-based Bruce 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".

He also told her at a January meeting at his office: "You cannot love Christ if you wear pants (jeans), and you cannot be a Christian if you leave the Brethren." The revelation is backed up by notes of the conversation taken immediately after it ended.

Meanwhile, documents obtained under freedom of information 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 this year between Mr Hales and the girl, the mother, with help from the church, moved the girl, her sister and brother 700 kilometres away from their father.

The father, who spoke on condition of anonymity, 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," he told *The Age*. The separation comes even though the Family Court has granted him joint guardianship of the children, and guaranteed weekly access — conditions which have been ignored.

The man's children told him they had been lured to the Sydney meeting, at which another senior Brethren member, Sydney businessman Neil Kennard, was present, under the promise of an apology and a gift of money.

But the church wanted to keep the father away from his children because he had ceased being a member in 1999.

However, he had been living with, or near, the girls and his ex-wife, at her invitation, through most of 2005. During this time he says she repeatedly asked him to "Please protect me from the Brethren, I can't deal with the pressure they put on me".

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 requests for an interview 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 Exclusive Brethren has become notorious for breaking up families when one member falls out of favour with, or leaves, the church.

The Age has obtained correspondence between the Brethren and former Family Court chief justice Alastair Nicholson, and Attorney-General Philip Ruddock, in which they try 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 Mr Nicholson complaining that they were being mistreated by judges.

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 due to their "diametrically opposed lifestyle".

The Brethren say their 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," they say.

Brethren women are required to wear long skirts, no make-up, and have their hair long, in scarves. 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.

They say a member of their sect knows that, when he leaves, he "immediately forfeits any rights to the continuance of family relationships".

The sect deems activities such as watching TV, listening to the radio, or having access to computers "conduits of evil".

The Age has also seen a number of letters written by young children to their fathers accusing them of being evil.

Former Brethren members say their children are taught by sect elders to spit at their fathers, throw stones, and say they do not want to see them.

Former Brethren member Vincent Field remembers 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 parents 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.

Psychologist Louise Samways said the Family Court did not understand the "ferocity of the fear

planted in these children".

When you see news happening: SMS/MMS: 0406 THE AGE (0406 843 243), or [email us](#). [More](#)

[Get The Age home delivered for as little as \\$3.00 a week*](#)

Copyright © 2006. The Age Company Ltd.