

North and South

Suffer the Little Children

Stanley and Julia Field were separated from their two sons and daughter at Christmas 1989 when they were excommunicated from Nelson's Exclusive Brethren community. In the past three years they have spent just two hours in contact with their beloved children, Vincent, now aged 11, Carlton, nine and Roberta, eight.

Like all Exclusive Brethren, the Field children were brought up to believe their duty to God lies above all earthly duties or ties. When Stan and Julia fell from grace, the Field children, then five, six, and eight, faced a cruel choice: salvation with the Brethren or joining Mummy and Daddy in "the world".

On February 8, the Christchurch Family Court will start to try and untangle a tortuous web of divided loyalties and competing ideologies in an internationally unique custody battle.

The case will be watched by hundreds of disaffected former Exclusive Brethren in New Zealand and Australia, each with their own tale of heartbreak and wrecked families; relationships between once happily married couples and loving siblings rent asunder in the name of Christ.

Julia Field sits in the half light of her stark dining room fingering a single sheet of paper, a sheet which weighs more heavily than the tomes of psychologists' reports and affidavits constructing the custody battle for her three children.

Her face remains impassive, her voice flat as she reads from a child's letter the simple-multiple choice test her eldest son, Vincent, has set himself. It comes complete with a carefully drawn square box to cross or tick. The choice lies between "Mummy = wold (sic)---or Brethren, Daddy = wold (sic)---or Brethren."

Three years have passed since Vincent posed the cruel question for himself and now Julia fears he has reached an answer: an answer which may prove too emphatic for even the highest court in the land to overturn.

An answer deeply reassuring to Julia Field's 74-year-old Exclusive Brethren parents, Geoff and Letitia Hickmott, in whose care the three Field children have remained since Julia and her husband Stan were "withdrawn from", or excommunicated, in December 1989.

Today, Julia, 29, and Stan, 33, are trying to come to terms with the bitter knowledge that Vincent, at least, regards his parents as the devil incarnate.

While they agonise over their three-year separation, Vincent torments himself with the possibility that a judge in a heathen court may this month return him to his parents' table. He has told his grandparents he will run away if he is sent home.

Roberta, the Field's eight-year-old daughter, told her parents that grandmother had warned her if she returned home she might die.

Technically Julia and Stan should have had no contact whatsoever with Julia's parents over the past three years. Once a member of the Brethren has parted ways with the fellowship, there can be no meeting, no sitting at table together, no conversation, not even an acknowledgment on the

street. But there have been occasional breaches over the years as Julia made repeated toll calls to her parents imploring them to release the children.

Once, after a dash to Rangiora to try to remove the children from their grandparents, the Fields negotiated a brief meeting in a park. And more recently, since the squall of publicity surrounding the case, there have been occasional telephone conversations with the children---enough for Julia to recoil at the arrogant tone of voice adopted by her eldest son who clearly regards her as a lost soul.

Julia and Stan's greatest fear is that three years of separation and Brethren teaching will have shaped their children into fearful creatures who associate salvation with the Exclusive Brethren and damnation with their parents.

Indeed, Julia and Stan once saw it that way.

On the first of January 1990, just days after Julia's excommunication and in the midst of great personal trauma, the young couple sent a letter to the children's grandparents, asking them to take responsibility for the care of the children "until such a time as things can be worked out with us".

The letter, marked "c/o Mr. Edward Malcolm", a prominent Nelson Exclusive Brethren, also stated Stan and Julia's wish that their three children "remain amongst the Brethren to be brought up in the fellowship".

Although no legal impediment existed to prevent the Field's from reclaiming their children at any time between December 1989 and May 12 1992, they made no attempt to bring them home during those first 12 months. Something higher than the court of law stood in their way---duty to God.

Stan explains the incomprehensible: "We didn't try to get the children back, because we believed it would be a very evil thing to do, taking them away from the fellowship. In the Brethren you're brought up believing the children belong to the church and are only yours on loan to look after for the church."

If there was ever any doubt in their minds during those misery-filled months of 1990, they had only to refer to the *Bible* with its threats of a "large millstone" tied around the neck of any one who causes "one of these little ones to lose his faith in me", and an occasional anguished conversation with Julia's father to remind them that the children at least should be saved their parents' shame.

Saved too from the extreme social and emotional ostracism which is a necessary consequence of being withdrawn from the fellowship. In one blow the couple's entire familial and social structure was cut away from beneath them; lifetime friendships, blood ties between brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, parents and children, gone, obliterated as surely as if the Field's were dead. Which symbolically, for the Brethren, they are.

Stan Field leads the way through the dark wood-panelled hallway of his home with a self-deprecating "welcome to the house of evil". Somehow the joke falls flat as his anxious eyes seek reassurance that the line was of course intended as a joke.

The house, an 80-plus-year-old bungalow, is set in a comfortable suburban Richmond street 10 minutes west of Nelson. Directly opposite the Fields' driveway is an Exclusive Brethren meeting house. Next to that lives Stan's brother, Julia's uncle lives down the road, Stan's aunt over the back fence and his father just around the corner. A cosy arrangement until the rot set in.

And as if there were not enough Brethren eyes keeping watch on the sinners, there is also a private

investigator who introduced himself to the Richmond police before Christmas, seeking any information they might have on the Fields. Sergeant Paul Williams told *North & South* he was given to understand the investigator was employed by Brethren in Christchurch.

The Fields' house is blessed or cursed, depending on your attitude to home renovations, with four-inch tongue and groove panelling extending from floor to ceiling. The couple have diverted their energy into restoring their house and fashioning bedrooms to delight their children when they return.

The effect is enormously depressing. Instead of lending olde world charm, the dark wood oppresses and seems to filter the warmth out of the daylight at each window. The brass bedheads and pink ruffles awaiting Roberta's return serve as a cruel reminder of the fact she has not lain her head to rest in this house since she was five years old. The three larger-than-life child portraits hanging over the Fields' double bed seem unbearably bright in this dark house.

And Julia and Stan themselves seem like creatures who have spent their lives in some occluded corner: their faces carry the stoic expressions and sickly pallor of Moscovites, their tale is told in a strangely monosyllabic and halting fashion, giving the impression of foreigners trying to make themselves understood in a strange land.

Like a refugee couple who have suffered some unspeakable tragedy and are only just now finding the words to tell the world what has happened.

The Fields left their home shores three years ago after breaking faith with their biblical family. Psychologically and emotionally they might just as well be stranded in Mozambique as this sunny street in Nelson. They may carry New Zealand citizenship and trace their ancestors back to staunch Irish and Scottish immigrants, but Stan and Julia were born in a foreign land.

Like most Brethren families, Stan and Julia were part of large families; Stan the eldest son of a Nelson family of eight boys and Julia the daughter of a well-known Rangiora Brethren family of three boys and four girls.

To outsiders the restrictions imposed on those in fellowship with the Exclusive Brethren appear oppressive and bizarre. But as children Stan and Julia were living in a closed community where family and friends were all operating within the same belief system and code of conduct.

Despite the restrictions on normal teenage life, such as no prerecorded music or "worldly" clothes or competitive sport, both Stan and Julia speak warmly of the Brethren life style.

"In one sense it's an excellent way of life---very secure, very caring. Everything in your life is taken care of; you don't have insurance but if your house burns down you receive enough money to replace it. Your social life is full and all laid on, your wife will be a member of the Brethren and when you marry she will come and join you wherever you are.

"Many Brethren have wealthy businesses---in this district they include farmers and orchardists and farm machinery businesses like Edward Malcolm's.

"Often you will work for a member of the fellowship and live in a street surrounded by Brethren homes."

But as their teenage years advanced the tensions that were to divide the Brethren over the next two decades were already beginning to surface as a succession of hard-line international leaders began to assert their authority over the New Zealand Brethren.

Julia has vivid memories of a visit by one such influential leader, James Taylor jun. who came to her parents' Rangiora home in 1970.

"I was only six or seven at the time but it stuck in my memory because it was the first time I remember Dad having a bottle of whiskey in the house. Mr. Taylor was a great whiskey fan and he rebuked my father for pouring too small a measure.

"My mother had cooked this wonderful roast dinner in JT's honour but he criticised her for being excessive---meat and one vegetable was all that was required. I remember the humiliation we all felt---but especially my mother's."

Known to the Brethren, as the "Elect Vessel" or "Paul Of Our Day", these men, who shun the title of leader, have come to exert extraordinary moral power over their followers.

The Brethren have always held staunchly to the belief that those in fellowship must be separate from iniquity and evil, either by "shutting up" the offending member until he or she had repented or, in serious cases, by withdrawing from that person completely---morally, physically and legally.

As children Stan and Julia both felt the full weight of Assembly discipline as members of their family were shut up at various times for misdemeanours, Julia's first taste of the new regime came when she and a sister went on a picnic with some extended family members. Unbeknown to her, picnics with other families were now out of bounds as they promoted particular friendships to develop which could hinder the equal love for all members of the Brethren community. She and her family were shut up.

Stan and Julia say increasingly throughout their late adolescent and early adult lives the rules and scriptural revelations began to shift like the sands, encroaching further and further into the minutiae of their daily lives and becoming ever more oppressive.

Julia and Stan have provided a list of the rules they believed were in force within the Brethren in New Zealand up until the time they parted ways in 1990. The list includes rules prohibiting those in fellowship from watching television or videos or listening to the radio, from attending cinemas or theatres, from using computers, radio telephones or fax machines, from attending university or using libraries for leisure, from marrying an outsider or eating with them; rules dissuading Brethren from picnicking with other Brethren or from recreational fishing and hunting or participating in competitive sports and school camps; dress codes dictating that women must refrain from wearing trousers or worldly clothes and must cover their heads with scarves.

Stan explains that while the Brethren may deny these are "rules", in the same sense as the 10 Commandments, they carry equal sway within the fellowship.

"Julia and I were shut up in 1982---together with half the Brethren in New Zealand---for catching a glimpse of Charles and Di's wedding on a television screen as we walked through a shopping mall.

"The leader will just mention something that is concerning him and then it will be transcribed and relayed to the rest of the world in these little weekly and monthly booklets, known as the ministry. These carry equal weight as the *Bible*."

Julia and Stan's 12-year marriage did not get off to a very auspicious start. They had met through the frequent round of meetings which take Brethren thousands of kilometres around the country each year, and Stan had been given permission to take Julia as his wife.

The 22-year-old plasterer bought his 17-year-old bride-to-be a beautiful engagement ring, only to

find that engagement rings were suddenly unacceptable---extravagant, vain and foolish. The ring was returned to the shop.

The episode over Julia's engagement ring might have faded into history, except for the fact that Julia Field was a little stropy for a Brethren woman---not the sort to walk with bowed head and veiled eyelids. She came to Nelson from a Brethren stronghold in rural Canterbury where she claims life was less rigidly controlled than in Nelson, one of the original Exclusive Brethren settlements founded by James Deck in 1852.

As in many fundamentalist religions, be it Judeo-Christian or Muslim, Brethren women tend to bear the burden of moral edicts and codes prescribing what is seemly and unseemly in their conduct. After marriage they are generally not permitted to work outside the home and are frequently busy with very large families and the ceaseless round of social and spiritual gatherings among the fellowship. Their dress code is closely monitored and forbids them from wearing trousers or worldly clothes indicative of pride, vanity or overt sexuality.

Clothing surfaced as one of the key issues behind Julia Field's excommunication, specifically the bright red shirts she had made for her sons. Julia is a seamstress and was accustomed to taking on work from the Brethren "sisters" to supplement her husband's income as a carpenter and plasterer.

Certainly by 1988-89 the clothes she wore herself and made for her three children and fellow Brethren had become an issue, with Stan being forced to stop dressing the children in the shirts and word being put about among the sisters to stop using Julia as a seamstress. Stan had also been sternly upbraided one morning when his wife came to meeting wearing a long skirt without stockings.

In isolation and in a secular context, these petty infringements seem risible, but to the church it seems they were a sign of an inner lawlessness and worldliness which hinted at a deeper spiritual malaise in Julia Field. In 1987, Julia made herself a marked woman.

She had a brief affair with an outsider. Already under considerable strain among the Brethren, she had formed a platonic relationship with a man who offered some support and understanding at a time when Stan her husband was still staunchly within the fellowship and highly critical of his wife. Stan says this man eventually took advantage of Julia.

As soon as this became known, Julia was withdrawn. Stan lived separately from his wife in the same house for the first three weeks but then decided this was no way to mend a hurting marriage and resumed their relationship. Consequently he too was shut up and the pair lived for the next nine months under the rigours of Assembly discipline with their three preschool children, then aged four, three and two.

Finally the Assembly's conscience admitted the Fields back into fellowship after they had repented and Julia had mended her ways. The first three months back among the Brethren was a happy time, with the sinners welcomed warmly back into the fold. But from that time on, Brethren eyes were constantly watching Julia and reporting, either to Stan or to a "priestly person", on her movements and demeanour, in case of another slip. She was barred from having contact with her best friend---a sister in the Brethren---and generally made to feel, she says, like a leper.

And so began the gradual deterioration of the Field's marriage as Stan came under increasing pressure to "sit on" the woman he had the misfortune to take as his wife.

"I had him {Malcolm} packing on to me. Sometimes he'd say something about her in meetings---not

names but everyone knew exactly who he was talking about. Then I'd come home and put pressure on her.

"I would persecute her. I would be shitting myself about going to the next meeting wondering what was going to be said next. Julia and I got further and further apart, but I was terrified of defying the church and finding my own neck on the chopping board."

For her part Julia says she had been rightly excommunicated at the time of her brief affair but felt she was being asked to pay for it for the rest of her life.

"He {Malcolm} told Stan that I was to walk down the street with my head bowed down because I had publicly humiliated the church by being involved with an outside man. If I was seen walking along the road or in town, Stan would get a call saying where I was and what I might be up to.

"It was incredibly stressful. I had no sense of self worth."

At the same time, in the six months leading up to the crisis at Christmas 1989, Julia was also being pestered by phone calls from the man she had been briefly involved with. She refused his contact but finally turned to him on the Friday before Christmas after a terrible row with Stan.

Julia left home for two nights which she spent with the "outsider", before returning on the Sunday.

Stan was encouraged to start divorce proceedings on the Monday. She was instantly excommunicated and he was "shut up" for allowing her to return to the family home. As a consequence they had to live separately in the same house while trying to resolve the enormous problems in their by now very shaky marriage.

Three years on, the pain and confusion of those weeks remains. Infidelity wreaks havoc in any relationship, but the added burden of the Brethren's expectations of instant dissolution was enough to push the couple to the limits of their emotional endurance.

Under these circumstances the Fields agreed to send their children to Julia's parents while they sorted out their troubles. They had already planned to send them to Rangiora for a holiday over Christmas and now they urgently needed time to work through their marriage problems.

It was a year before they would try to bring the children back home.

The Fields say Edward Malcolm played a key role in organising for the children to be placed in their grandparents' care, including uplifting them from the Fields' house. But equally Stan himself concedes he had a semi-vindictive urge to separate them from Julia to punish her for her unfaithfulness.

Certainly neither was of a mind to question the righteousness of placing their children within the safe keeping of the Brethren until they themselves were "right" with the church again.

Stan withstood pressure to leave Julia during the next few weeks as slowly and miserably the couple decided they wanted to remain together. Together meant apart from the Brethren, and so the Fields retreated to a little cottage on an orchard and licked their wounds.

It seems extraordinary that the weight of shame, guilt and mutual recrimination did not bust the Fields apart as they waited in near total isolation for a time when they might either return to the fold or join the "world".

During this first year, on the rare occasion when they saw outsiders, the pair would pretend the

photographs of their children were of someone else---nephews and nieces. They were afraid to say a word against the Brethren for fear of the consequences. Often they went days without speaking a word to each other because the only words they had to say were too painful.

"I used to have such vivid dreams. I remember waking up one morning really early and I could hear the children talking in the room next door. I was so excited I leaped out of bed and woke up to find it was a dream." says Stan.

And for Julia there was the battle with suicidal thoughts as she spent hours walking along the beach: "Life just didn't seem worth living without the children. Without the children we were like a rudderless ship, stripped of all sense of security and all sense of purpose."

At first Stan tried to maintain his plastering business but eventually the strain became too much and he sold out to his partner, making it possible to repay a \$4000 loan from a Brethren aunt who required repayment after the couple left the fellowship.

"In the end I found myself going to work and making it through until about 10 o'clock before turning around and coming back home. I was a wreck." Since May 1992 he has been receiving a sickness benefit.

Similarly Julia, who had not worked since 16 when she spent a year as a clerical assistant in a Brethren's office in Rangiora, ventured into a takeaway bar where she was employed briefly during the evenings.

"It was hopeless. What little confidence I had was completely gone by then. People would ask me whether I had children and I wouldn't know what to say. I couldn't cope at all.

"Stan and I were denying we had children at that stage. We would see young couples in the park with their children and just burst into tears."

Throughout this period, phone calls to Julia's parents enquiring after the children were redirected by Julia's father to Edward Malcolm whom the couple would call every six weeks asking for news. They say they were given none.

As time passed, Julia became increasingly convinced that there was no way back into fellowship for her. But Stan remained unsure until the time the pair first attempted to reclaim their children from their grandparents early in 1991.

Initially, Julia's father agreed there was little he could do to stop them from raking back the children, but a few days later, after an alleged consultation with Malcolm, he had changed his mind and told the Fields the children would not be released.

Next, in April, Stan and Julia wrote withdrawing their permission for Julia's parents to look after their children. In response the children, now nine, eight and six, wrote to their parents saying: "We are happy where we are. We don't want to come home until you get right with the Brethren."

In desperation the Fields approached a solicitor to act on their behalf and in May Richmond solicitor Ray Carter wrote to Julia's parents stating that from a legal point of view there could be no doubt that Stan and Julia had custody of their own children and that they should set about arranging their return promptly.

Julia's parents wrote back, admonishing the lawyer who had done a lot of work for the Brethren, for acting on Julia and Stan's instructions.

"We have a letter signed by both Stanley and Julia requesting us to care for them among the Brethren. The children have clearly conveyed to their parents that they only want to return when they (i.e. Stanley and Julia) are back in the 'church'...

"We have assured of their longing to return only when their parents' conduct and associations are suitable to the fellowship of his {God's} Son Jesus Christ our Lord."

The letter seems to belie Malcolm's assertion that the Fields' case is "a family matter and primarily between the parents and grandparents". Certainly it is a family matter, but more significantly a Brethren family matter.

So much so, that when the Fields drove south to uplift their children physically in June 1991 they were confronted by a street lined with Brethren cars and a group of up to 20 Brethren gathered at Julia's family home to prevent her entering the house. The Fields were told their children did not wish to see them.

The couple retreated to a motel and phoned Julia's parents, imploring them to allow them at least to see their children. No promises were made but the next morning the Fields were told that (Brethren leader) John Hales in Sydney had been consulted and he had given permission for the children to meet their parents in a park, provided the grandparents remained present. (Later, in September 1992, Hales would actually meet with the Field children who by that stage had become a cause celebre for the Brethren.)

It was an awkward and tense encounter at first, but Julia says gradually the children shrugged off their diffidence and fear and began to respond with affection and delight. Until Julia asked whether they would like to come home with them. Grandma stepped in and assured them this was not possible.

Again in August the Fields drove south, arriving unannounced at the children's school; but it was not a happy meeting, with their eldest son clearly distressed and the school's principal legally bound not to allow the parents to uplift the children while they were in his care.

Julia and Stan were forced to confront the fact that by now their eldest son at least had turned against them and was convinced that to return to his parents would be to abandon the fellowship of the Brethren and betray deep loyalties. Julia's aged parents had something stronger than the law on their side.

Throughout this time and in the ensuing months Julia repeatedly defied Assembly discipline by telephoning her parents and asking them for news of her children and imploring them to let them return home. Sometimes the calls were abusive (on Julia's part), sometimes they were just sad.

"Usually Dad would just say 'the children are well and happy' and then put down the telephone."

Once, her father told Julia she and Stan would one day "thank God we're preserving them {the children} for you."

Finally, on May 1 1992, when it seemed every other avenue had been exhausted, Stan and Julia turned to their local Member of Parliament, Nick Smith, who advised them to engage a family lawyer. They applied ex parte for interim custody of their children. The application was ex parte (without the foreknowledge of Julia's parents) because the couple feared their children would be whisked away into hiding with other Brethren if they realised the matter was coming before the court.

But 12 days later and before the Fields' application had proceeded to hearing, Julia's parents themselves successfully obtained an ex parte interim custody order, apparently on the basis of a firearms incident involving Stan's brother, Simon, and Edward Malcolm.

Simon Field, separated from his own wife for the last 10 years after being withdrawn from the Brethren, had, unbeknown to Julia and Stan, gone to Malcolm's home with a shotgun, threatening to hold him hostage until he ordered the release of the Field children.

The police defused the situation without anyone being harmed but this incident was used to good effect by Julia's parents in obtaining an interim custody order over the grandchildren and further delaying any resolution of the conflict. The Fields were never involved in the police inquiry and have sworn affidavits disclaiming any prior knowledge of Simon's intentions.

But from this point on it became clear there would be no resolution outside the court room.

For an outsider it is hard to comprehend a belief system so rigid as to convince two normal loving parents of their unworthiness to raise their own children. When the Fields, in desperation, finally took their case to Tasman MP Nick Smith, the country was astounded by the apparently bizarre and punitive codes of conduct adopted by this quiet community of Christians.

Under cover of Parliament, Smith revealed how the Fields first fell foul of the Brethren when Julia dared to "dress her children in bright colours, and shock horror, denim." He later drew on more examples from a large volume of mail from former Exclusive Brethren from Kaitaia to Bluff who wanted to share their bitter and extraordinary stories of alleged persecution.

Nick Smith has a file of 200 letters full of miserable tales of family splits: fathers forced to walk out of their homes and never seeing their offspring or wives again, sons who only learned of their mother's death years after she was secretly buried by the Brethren, brothers and sisters barred from reaching each other in times of sickness and family crisis.

The letters all tell of such human misery and bitterness, and all exhort Smith to carry on the good fight while simultaneously warning him that he will very probably fail. They warn of the chorus of top-flight lawyers who will be wheeled in to conduct the defamation litigation on behalf of this "leaderless" band of simple Christians; they warn that for every five former Brethren Smith can produce to back up his allegations, the Brethren will find another 10 to swear it is not so.

And in truth, Smith is a little afraid. Since overcoming a scriptural scruple forbidding Christians from suing each other in the "heathen courts", the Exclusive Brethren have acquired a penchant for mounting successful libel suits against their public critics. In 1983 the Christchurch High Court ordered *The Press* to pay damages totaling \$102,000 to five Motueka Exclusive Brethren after a series of articles investigating the alleged suicide of a fellow Brethren.

Stan and Julia Field remember the case well. Throughout the six-week hearing, Brethren throughout the country rose at 6 am and went to their respective meeting halls to pray for victory over the pagan *Press*. Stan remembers hauling himself out of his wedding bed in the first week of his marriage to Julia. Small wonder *The Press* lost.

Malcolm's lawyers have threatened to issue proceedings against Smith, after he conducted a series of television and radio interviews alleging Malcolm's close involvement with the Fields' case and accusing the Brethren of "emotional blackmail and breaking up families."

But former Brethren like Murray Turley and the Woods brothers of Motueka, MP David Lange's Mangere constituent Selwyn Wallace and Christchurch's Clem Lewis all appear to provide

incontrovertible evidence in support of Smith's allegations.

Murray Turley, a 56-year-old pilot, was finally prompted to break a 14-year silence in November last year after Malcolm publicly denied the Brethren's role in family break-ups. Turley was escorted from his Wellington home by two "priestly persons" in 1978, leaving behind six children with whom he has had no further contact. His youngest child was two at the time.

Turley, now unemployed and living in Motueka, told *North & South*; "It was a Saturday night. Every detail of that scene is etched into my mind like acid. My wife stood at the door with the baby in her arms and the five-year-old clinging to her skirts sobbing her heart out saying, 'Don't let Daddy go, don't let him go.'

"The two priestly persons placed themselves between us as they waited for me to leave the property. It felt like being cast into the darkness. I knew nobody at all outside the Brethren, loved my wife and children desperately and for five years refrained from forging any friendships with outsiders in case it precluded some possible future reconciliation with the Brethren and my family."

Turley's excommunication came, as in many instances, as the culmination of a series of small disputes or questioning of the local leadership. Questioning and a general stropiness which earned him that dreaded label of contentiousness. Turley found himself out of work after being forced to give up his job as a commercial pilot because the Brethren could not accept him working on a Sunday. He needed to shift his family to the South Island to find work and a cheaper home but the local Brethren did not agree. The Turleys were to stay put.

Although Turley now views this policy of separation as iniquitous, at the time he and his wife submitted meekly to the teachings of their faith.

After years of huge personal and financial upheavals, Turley again felt the icy hand of Brethren righteousness finger his collar in 1989. He had been offered the chance to fly for Air Nelson and was completing his last trial flight when he was seen by a group of Brethren passing through the airport. Within a week Turley was again facing unemployment.

The Brethren approached Air Nelson to explain how intolerable it would be for a Brethren to find himself a passenger in any plane piloted by Turley. Air Nelson explained it would not be possible to inform Brethren when Turley was rostered to fly. The Brethren, who fly a great deal and whose business is of no small commercial importance, made it clear this was not an acceptable position.

Turley and Air Nelson recognised an impasse and parted company. Edward Malcolm denies emphatically that any commercial pressure was placed on Air Nelson. An Air Nelson senior official was most reluctant to discuss the Brethren, but when pressured confirmed Turley's account of events. *North & South* also understands the airline has come under some pressure from the Brethren to publicly deny Smith's allegations.

Then there are the Woods boys, Ashton, Leon and Brendon, who to this very day must walk Motueka's streets and see their mother pass by without so much as a smile or a gesture of recognition.

After Nick Smith publicly exposed the Field case the Woods decided the time had come for them to speak up too. Their family was split 16 years ago when Ashton, then 23, was withdrawn from for going shooting as a leisure pursuit (as opposed to shooting for food, which is permitted). Brendon, then 13, ignored the edict forbidding him from all contact with Ashton and consequently he and his parents were "shut up" for a year.

In practice this meant that his siblings were farmed out to other Brethren homes, leaving Brendon and his parents to stew in their sinfulness. After a year, Brendon decided he could no longer stand seeing his mother's heartbreak at being separated from her children but nor would he agree to forgo all contact with Ashton. He left home and within a day of Brendon's departure all the children were back home.

Leon can recall times when his 14-year-old brother would try to return home to see his parents, only to be turned away. "On one occasion the police were called in to remove him from the property. He simply wasn't welcome until he was right with the church."

As a child, Leon remembers checking the doors and windows at night to make sure they were securely locked against Brendon who had been portrayed to his brothers and sisters as the devil incarnate.

Leon himself was excommunicated at the age of 23 and his father, a member for 61 years, was excommunicated in August 1991 after being given an ultimatum to remove the radio telephones from his logging trucks. In leaving the Brethren he was forced to walk out on a 42-year marriage. Six months later he died of a heart attack.

It also seems that the Brethren's way of life today condones hiring a private detective to see what "evidence" can be collected against the Fields.

Julia believes her parents will criticise her mothering skills and will claim there have been a large number of loud parties where alcohol was consumed and loud music played, trying to demonstrate that Stan and Julia are wayward and irresponsible---not fit to have custody of their children.

Julia and Stan do not appear to be wayward and irresponsible. Certainly, in the summer of 1991 after returning to their home, they hosted a few barbecues with a dozen or so new friends. And certainly they have enjoyed the new-found freedom of playing music---albeit in a Brethren-lined street. A non-Brethren neighbor has signed an affidavit supporting the Fields and their sober lifestyle.

Julia says when they finally discarded all thoughts of returning to the fold and moved back into their own home in the summer of 1991/92, they went through a brief period of rebellion against the Brethren and became a "little wild".

"It was nothing by most people's standards, a few parties and some loud music---Queen and Little River Band, but we apologised to the neighbours afterwards."

By this time the Fields were beginning to reconstruct their lives in the outside world. They had made friends with Stan's former workmates---people he would never have socialised with while they were within the Brethren---and were also in touch with other excommunicated Brethren like the Woods boys from Motueka. A television set and stereo graced their barren house and Julia began taking in sewing again---this time for "worldly" women.

But to construct a normal life out of this new-found freedom was a hollow excuse without their children, especially when those children were still living in the country Stan and Julia had fled.

Stan speaks of days when the pair were too churned up to eat; "It's always on your mind; you go to bed thinking about it and wake up thinking about it. Your mind's just going nonstop, wondering what effect it's having on them. Wondering how long it will take to convince them of our love again.

"It drives you crazy knowing you are powerless against what they say to the children. Knowing you

once believed it all yourself. In some ways it would be easier if they had died, because then it is over."

And for Julia there is the torment of dealing with parents she once loved but now must face as adversaries in the courtroom; "We've been through hell. It really, really hurts when I talk to Dad on the telephone, and he starts crying too. I just try to black out the thoughts of seeing them in court being interrogated. I never wanted that.

"In a way I still love them but I can't understand how they can treat their own daughter in this way."

Julia's parents would not allow her and Stan to see the children on Christmas Day. The children's new bikes and presents from birthdays past are waiting in their bedrooms for the day they return.

"I wrote to Vincent on his birthday in December and told him the present was waiting for him. Ever since we knew the children were not opening our gifts we have been in the habit of sending flowers and cards and just keeping their gifts here."

Vincent wrote back and told his mother he did not approve of birthday parties.

Julia and Stan are well reconciled to the fact that when---they cannot face an "if"---their children are returned home they will face months of not years of deprogramming and will need the skills of expert counsellors to put the glue back into this divided family.

One heart-rending line for Vincent sums it all up; "I want to love Mummy but I am afraid to love her."

HISTORY OF THE EXCLUSIVE BRETHREN

Nelson's late spring verdure threatens to swamp every fruit stall and road sign between the city and Motueka this year. The coastal road to Motueka lopes from orchard to craft co-op in a careless romp through some of New Zealand's lushest and most fertile horticultural land.

A fertile land too for the DIY religions that sprouted from the puritanical roots of the early Scottish and Irish settlers who spent much of the 1800's battling for the colony's brown soul. Nelson and its hinterland seem as overburdened with fundamentalist Christian outposts as the West Coast is with drinking holes. Drive down any of the main roads dissecting the district's townships and AA signs seem to point in every direction to meeting houses and church halls for every denomination under the sun.

Edward Malcolm, a prominent Exclusive Brethren and proprietor of the wealthy and influential Nelson farm Machinery chain, Malcolm Machinery, can trace his family back to the first generations of Exclusive Brethren who settled in the district in 1852 with the early Brethren leader James Deck.

It would seem back country Christians in the new colony were happy to abandon the formal denominational high churches of the England in favour of the egalitarian and rough hewn gatherings of the Church of Christ, the Brethren and the Primitive Methodists. The Brethren---who were at that point a relatively open community---attracted many converts and thrived in the low key, informal setting of the new colony.

But by 1875, when the Brethren's founder, J. Darby visited Motueka, New Zealand Brethren had been smitten by the same dissensions and divisions which had rent their communities in England.

The schism occurred over alleged false teachings among some of the English communities and also touched on the issue of central control and whether Brethren should exclude other Christian denominations from worshipping with them and partaking in the breaking of bread.

During his stay in Motueka, Darby convinced Deck to conform with the hardline separatist position and central control which earned followers the label of Exclusive Brethren.

Despite a modern history pitted with schisms and crises as periodic "purges" have seen dissenters and the fragile fall by the wayside, the Exclusive Brethren survived until the 1960's with little outward sign of discontent.

The purges, initiated by leaders or "Elect Vessels", as they received fresh insight into the scriptures and their moral implications for the lives of the Brethren, were aimed at preserving the purity of the Brethren and protecting the group from the morally corrupt.

In recent times these purges have frequently been accompanied by a rash of stories in the local newspapers as the rejected and often deeply embittered castaways turn in anger on the community on whom they depended for all their social, financial and spiritual needs. But it was not until the 1960s and the new teachings of James Taylor Jr. demanded Brethren abstain from eating with outsiders that the country as a whole first took notice of this mute sect.

Lifelong ties between family members, husbands and wives and employers and employees were suddenly and ruthlessly terminated and the righteous ones separated from those not in fellowship. Many husbands and wives left to join the ranks of the Open Brethren or the Baptists and Methodists.

The obligation to separate from evil---and from those who refuse to separate from wrong doers---is a cardinal principle of the Brethren way of life and in its most extreme practice over the past 20 years has been responsible for hundreds of marriage and family break-ups among the estimated 50,000 global Brethren population.

Edward Malcolm and the flock of 800 Brethren in the upper half of the South Island are survivors of these staunch decades and have gone on to build an ever higher wall between themselves and the iniquities of contemporary life in New Zealand.

To thousands of Christians in New Zealand the list of Brethren "rules" seems as foreign as hated killing. But to those in Fellowship it is a way of life refined by generations of God fearing man (sic) determined to protect their flock from the rot of this world.

Malcolm is one such man. In a rare interview he told *North & South* that contrary to popular belief the lives of Brethren are not hemmed in at every turning by a book of rules.

"We have never governed our lives by a set of rules. It's never been in our minds. We regard the scriptures not just as a history book but as a moral book in which God sets out invariable principles which govern us. The scriptures themselves are our guidelines in life."

Malcolm says nobody is expected to follow guidelines without any scriptural basis, whether it be forsaking a law degree or refraining from using radio telephones.

"We don't like to use the airwaves normally. Satan is the prince of the power of the air and that medium is used to get right into a believer's home---we don't want that."

And as for tertiary education, there was a time when Brethren could be found in universities and

teachers colleges but in more recent days it has been decided that higher education leads to a certain "Godlessness" and dependence on rationalism, which is an anathema to the life of faith.

As Malcolm sits in his spacious and comfortably furnished lounge, Bible within easy reach and wife Catherine sitting mutely at some distance, the room slowly fills with Malcolm's adult children and grandchildren, who gather about as if for an audience. He gestures to them and explains how his grandfather and father before him successfully brought up 10 children each without the aid of television or radio and he has succeeded in doing the same.

As if to prove the point a winsome little granddaughter (dressed in a denim skirt) is sent to fetch her school report which speaks in flowing terms of an intelligent, curious and co-operative pupil. A teacher's delight.

To understand how such a seemingly normal, if unfashionably strict network of Christian families can earn Smith's description in Parliament as "a church which is involved in extreme forms of psychological blackmail, that is used to rip families apart in the name of Christianity" means coming to grips with a community informally self governed by a unique combination of fear, fellowship and blind faith.

While a fundamentalist and literal interpretation of the scriptures may be the cornerstone of the Brethren's belief system. over the years this has been vastly augmented by the ministerings or revelations of the Elect Vessels, or the "Paul Of Our Day". These unofficial spiritual role models trace themselves back in a line pitted with dissension and breakaway groups of Darby, the Brethren's 1820's founder, and a distinguished Greek biblical scholar and churchman.

In recent history they have included James Taylor, Sr. who visited New Zealand in 1925 and 1936, his son and successor, James Taylor Jr., James Symington who visited in 1977 after rows erupted in Christchurch over allegations of family breakups and harsh and arbitrary discipline. John Hales, his successor and present day Elect Vessel, lives in Australia and according to the Fields is intimately acquainted with their custody case, as he is with the details of any functions within his international flock.

Julia Field's father admitted to her that he had consulted Hales before agreeing to allow the children to meet briefly with their parents in a park and in September last year the Fields' lawyer Julia O'Connor was informed Hales had met with the Field children while on a visit to New Zealand.

Hales, like those before him., plays a critical role in interpreting the scriptures and providing fresh insights into the pattern of life to be followed by the Brethren, whether this concerns the propriety of engagement rings, the conduct of business or whether little girls should wear a full headscarf or just a band on their heads. His concerns and so-called "guidelines" are disseminated throughout the world in weekly, bound booklets containing transcripts of various meetings and ministries he and other morally leading members have conducted around the world.

There was a time when such minutiae of daily life were outside the focus of the unofficial leadership, but over time, and perhaps in response to the increasingly "decadent" world in which the Brethren must survive, the guidelines have encroached further and further into the Brethren way of life and the requirements of fellowship have become seemingly ever more stringent.

Ironically, the movement whose origins in the 1820s owed so much to anti clericalism and Papism, is now dominated by a system of despotic leadership more absolutist and extreme than the Pope could imagine in his wildest fantasies. When the Pope says no contraceptives, half his flock thumbs its collective nose at him while continuing to front up on a Sunday. When Hales says no contraceptives, every book on the Billings method is chased out from under every Brethren

mattress and burned.

To enforce such discipline among far flung communities of Brethren in Britain, the United States, Australia and New Zealand is a difficult thing for a numerically small and scattered sect. It requires constant travel by the "informal leaders", vast amounts of travel for ordinary followers who drive thousands of kilometres each month to participate in ministry and meetings and enormous toll accounts as local "informal leaders" consult with Hales over everything from business to marriage arrangements.

But more importantly such coherence relies on a highly developed and well oiled system of pimping and punishment. Malcolm calls it looking after each other or taking responsibility for each other's spiritual well-being. In practice it amounts to telling tales on each other. Such tales, when dropped in the right ear, invariably result in shame and public humiliation for the wrong doer.

The sort of humiliation Julia Field was subjected to in meetings of 600 Brethren after she gained the reputation of a "lawless" and "contentious" woman---two of the worst labels that can be applied to a member of the fellowship.

More seriously, it can result in a person or family being "shup-up" or ultimately, as in the Fields' case, "withdrawn from".

Malcolm laughs at the idea of a community of Christians bound by fear and a set of intransigent rules. "You can't hold people together by a set of arbitrary rules. In the Westport/Nelson area there would be 850 Brethren and the same again down south and we are nearly totally a happy big family.

"Of course you get one or two dissenters who go away to attack us and that raises your ire a bit."

Malcolm refused to discuss any details of the Fields' case with *North & South*, but he was prepared to address wider issues in relation to the Exclusive Brethren community. And in doing so he made oblique reference to their position.

"When it comes to moral matters we hold the sanctity of marriage as inviolable.

"If someone wants to go off in other relationships, well after every appeal was made and we had done all we could to help, we'd have to go our separate ways.

"That doesn't mean if a person wants to mend their ways they can't come back. Of course they can. All sins can be settled by repentance."

And yes, whatever the cause, any parting of ways among the fellowship is heartbreaking, but the bottom line must always be duty to God.

"Look at the martyrs, they put the rights of God before any other. We have the examples of young women with babies in their arms and their father pleading with them and still they wouldn't change their convictions. They went to death rather than change their conviction."

And as for the fate of children in these divided households?

"The children would make up their own minds. But if they are young it would be a matter of what the parents wanted."

Like the Fields' children?

"I won't go into that case. I could, but it's been misrepresented. But if the parents were in trouble and they'd got themselves wrong and they'd got to the point---which is a long way down the track---of getting out of fellowship, and they wanted the children to stay among the Brethren, then they'd certainly be cared for."

Malcolm would not be specific about the age at which a child was deemed capable of making an informed moral judgement about whether he or she wished to remain among the Brethren.

"I don't think any age is fixed. But the Lord did say, suffer little children to come unto me."

RON FAWKES - CHALLENGING BRETHERN AUTHORITY

Ron Fawkes, a Perth furniture manufacturer and one-time "leader" among Australia's 10,000-strong Brethren, says he has no hesitation in calling today's Exclusive Brethren a cult.

"Yes, in my view it is a cult and one of the most insidious cults in Christendom."

Fawkes has fierce views, fueled in part no doubt by his bitter departure from centre stage in Australia and the loss of his wife and six children following his excommunication in 1984. Fawkes says he was "withdrawn from" for challenging the supreme authority vested in the Elect Vessel, or universal leader, who was then Jim Symington.

While in New Zealand over Christmas holidaying with his new wife and daughter, Fawkes offered his services to Nick Smith and the Fields in an effort to help undo some of the "wrong" he himself had once abetted in his role as right-hand man to the Australian leader John Hales.

Fawkes may be an angry man, but he is also intelligent. He says while officially the Brethren have no leader, the moral authority on the Elect Vessel is undisputed. "His ministry takes precedence over everything else and he is regarded as almost the personification of the Holy Spirit.

"The published records of Brethren meetings would be referred to as what the spirit of God is saying in the temple, but for all intents and purposes it comes down to the work of one man."

Fawkes shares Malcolm's close cropped, clean-shaven, starched shirt look. Despite his excommunication in 1984, he remains a staunch Christian and voluntarily adheres to many of the Brethren's codes, including abstaining from attendance at the cinema and theatre because of their godless influence in life.

He traces the extremism of today's Brethren with the emphasis on "extrabiblical" rulings without scriptural foundation to historical developments which began under James Taylor Sr. and accelerated under Taylor Jr. and Symington. Today, Hales, who had his spiritual upbringing under these men, is pursuing this policy of purging as "new light" emerges.

Fawkes says he has no hesitation in stating that the position of today's Brethren bears no moral resemblance whatsoever to the godly beginnings of the early Brethren. Furthermore, he says the emphasis on a constantly changing and arbitrary set of extrabiblical rules determined by the Elect Vessel gives today's Brethren all the characteristics of a cult.

"Any distinction between the morally significant and the trivial has been lost. The position now is that anyone who questions an edict is automatically labelled as contentious or lawless to the spirit of God."

To make the Elect Vessel synonymous with God's spirit is to create a system of absolute control

over followers and to what Fawkes describes as the ridiculous situation where the leader spends his days on international toll calls "suggesting" solutions to Brethren problems from who should marry to whether a new kitchen could be installed in a Brethren home.

"I'm not joking about that. In Britain, Brethren living in tenement housing with shared interior walls have now been forced to ensure there is a 5mm gap separating them from the adjoining home. This is the sort of thing we are dealing with.

"And it is not possible to query anything, because to do so is to challenge the authority of the Elect Vessel, and if you do that you're history."

Fawkes believes that since 1960 all Brethren marriages have been legally problematic because they have been subject to an unspoken conditional clause---that both members remain within the fellowship. Contrary to earlier teaching, under Symington and Hales excommunication of one partner has led to the automatic break-up of the family, unless the couple both left or the offending spouse was eventually readmitted to the fellowship.

Given that the Brethren rarely admit newcomers to their faith, the importance of holding on to members from birth to marriage to ensure a steady population base is imperative.

The Brethren use the apostle Paul's instruction to Timothy to separate from evil as justification for the parting of families if one member has fallen out of fellowship, but Fawkes says this literal interpretation of a single scripture can be offset against numerous other texts with contradictory messages.

"I believe Timothy is as authoritative as any other scripture. But like most cults, the Brethren have plucked one scripture out of the context of the whole and rammed it against every other scripture.

"To isolate scriptures out of context is highly dangerous and can be used to justify anything."

Fawkes describes John Hales as an ascetic and cold character intent on building higher and higher the wall between the Brethren and the world. He also accuses him of being the architect and implementer of the more extreme codes of separation and the consequent break-up of families and marriages.

"Of course, it's all done for a higher ideal. But it has now got to the point where many Brethren believe their eternal salvation is linked with membership of the Exclusive Brethren.

"What I now see is that it has become a completely Pharasiacal position. In the Scriptures the strongest rebukes were reserved for the Pharisees. They were the sort of people who would cross every t and dot every i, walk across the street to avoid passing a sinner, build their houses with a 5mm gap between themselves and their neighbours and wash the outside of the cup to make sure they were not defiled at table.

"But inside they were spiritually rotten and corrupt."

Fawkes says he has no doubt whatsoever that Hales is intimately acquainted with the Fields' custody case and has been offering his support.

Fawkes says the Brethren are a wealthy community and to "rustle up a few million worldwide" would be of little consequence. They have a large fighting fund and are able to employ top-flight lawyers in custody and defamation suits.

He says while Malcolm may be an authoritative figure in New Zealand, he fades into insignificance

compared with the top echelons:

"I can say without a shadow of doubt that Edward Malcolm would not lift a single finger without consulting John Hales."

Added 23 April 2000

I am told that the issue of *North and South* in which this story appeared was a sell-out at the newsstand. Apparently EBs throughout New Zealand rushed to the bookshops and purchased every copy in stock.

The story of Stan and Julia Field does not have a happy ending. New Zealand TV covered the story through several court cases and the ultimate judgement that the children should be with their parents. After three years, the children and parents were re-united. However, the brethren of New Zealand served notice of their intention to appeal the ruling to the highest courts in New Zealand. Stan and Julia Field chose to emigrate to Australia rather than to impoverish themselves hiring legal defense. I am now told that their marriage has ended in divorce.

I have a video that includes many of the news segments aired on New Zealand TV. See the [Library](#) for details.

--Dick Wyman