

Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (PBCC)

formerly The Exclusive Brethren

Who are the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (formerly The Exclusive Brethren)

Author: Your Name

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Background

The Bruce Hales 'Man of God' led Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, formerly the Exclusive Brethren, is a 50,000+ strong controversial sect, with communities in the UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand & USA with smaller communities in Argentina, Caribbean, Ireland, France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands & Sweden.

The sect leads a life of separation from the non-brethren world which they see as the devil's world, the separation includes not breaking bread (eating) with those outside of their community, no TV, restricted books & internet access, not attending university in person, not working for non-brethren companies or for the greater good in the public sector e.g. as Doctors, Nurses, Firefighters, Teachers.

This has led to brethren members running their own companies, some of these businesses have become highly successful. There are brethren companies that employ non-community workers, though separation is evident in the workplace. They do not allow union membership.

In terms of membership of the community, we estimate that 99%+ are born into the brethren. They attend non-community schools until 6-7 years old, and then move to the brethren operated schools (OneSchool Global). On leaving school they will then work for a brethren owned business. Brethren members are not allowed to date or marry outside of the community, without leaving the community. They are unable to visit pubs or restaurants. Travel and marriage must have approval by elders, with the latter requiring approval from the man of God, Bruce Hales. They must live in detached properties, to avoid sharing drains with the non-brethren community and they can only purchase properties with the approval of the local elders.

They live in communities that range from 50 to 600 members. The communities will be formed by a small number of extended families. In the UK they have circa ninety communities from Aberdeen to St Austell.

In this report we will give further background and highlight concerns surrounding the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church. These concerns include abuse, bullying, coercion, lobbying and the separation of brethren families.

Charity

The Plymouth Brethren have central charities. The charities support various parts of the brethren 'ecosystem' they include: **The Grace Trust**: Main brethren charity, distributes funds, with OSG, RRT, CHART, NAF the major beneficiaries. **Rapid Relief Team (RRT)**: PR front of the brethren, supplying free catering to emergency services & events. **Central Hardship & Relief Trust (CHART)**: Distributes funds to brethren members in need of support. **Central G H Trust**: Main meeting room charity, distributes funds to Gospel Trusts for new meeting rooms. **Bible & Gospel Trust**: The printing and control of meeting room material and scripture. **National Assistance Fund (NAF)**: Funded by the Grace Trust & UBT, it is unclear what they support.

Along with the Gospel & Educational trusts, the 15,000 brethren in the UK have around 200 registered UK charities. The total assets of these charities total between £300 and £400 million.

Business

Due to the separation of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, members are not allowed to work for non-brethren owned companies or any public organization, including the emergency services or government. The brethren members have over time built many businesses covering different sectors. We have found circa 1,500 companies registered on Companies house. There are circa 15,000 members of the PBCC in the UK.

These companies have assets of over £2 billion. Turning over an estimated £4 billion per annum. Research shows that approximately 100 of these companies benefitted from local and national government covid contracts, with the majority having no previous track record in the PPE or Testing sectors.

This was split between PPE and Lateral Flow Tests/Rapid Antigen Tests, with an awarded value in the region of £2.6 billion. We can also show that circa 85% of the £2.6 billion was linked to members of the family of brethren leader Bruce Hales in Sydney. Globally the contracts awarded total over £3.1 billion with large contracts in the Netherlands, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada.

Meeting Rooms

Each community has Meeting rooms, the larger communities will have more than one meeting room, on average there is a meeting room for every 35 to 40 members.

Each community will operate these under a Gospel Trust, which is usually a registered charity. The raising of funds is through donations from the community members and the brethren member owned businesses, there are also central brethren charities which support funding of these meetings rooms and the building of new meeting rooms.

The brethren must attend meetings everyday and up to 4 times on a Sunday for the Lord's meeting. Many communities have meeting rooms that can hold 500-1000 people, which is usually at odds with the size of the community.

OneSchool Global

OneSchool Global will usually operate a campus that covers 2 or 3 communities with free transport provided to the schools. The schools charge circa £3,750 per annum per pupil, there is support available for brethren families who can't afford the school fees.

There will be an educational trust for each school, and this will again usually be a registered charity, this trust will own the school buildings and operate a trading company as a fundraiser. This will usually encompass a local convenience store/mini supermarket under the Campus & Co brand. Members are strongly encouraged to use these stores for their grocery requirements. All the stores are operated by unpaid volunteers, usually the female brethren members. The turnover in the UK for Campus & Co is over £30 million a year.

OneSchool Global & Campus & Co are managed and controlled by the central UBT office which also provides the curriculum and the staffing for the schools.

UBT

UBT (Universal Business Team) is the central hub of the Plymouth Brethren, this is a non-profit which operates OneSchool Global and Campus & Co.

UBT is also the central business advisory for brethren member owned companies. Brethren companies and brethren members purchase all their IT requirements, Mobile/Cell phones through UBT which then controls the access to the internet via Streamline software. UBT provides the brethren businesses with training, consultancy, accountancy, fleet, HR, recruitment and is the central network for the brethren.

Turnover for UBT in the UK is circa £100 million a year and globally circa £250 million. The profits are then funneled indirectly to the schools via various brethren charities including the Grace Trust. The Grace Trust is the major contributor in the funding of the Rapid Relief Team (RRT).

Rapid Relief Team

The Rapid Relief Team is the public facing charity of the Plymouth Brethren. Formed following the UK charity commission enquiry in 2013.

The RRT provides catering to emergency services and other high profiles events. Costing approx. £1 million per annum to run, the RRT demonstrates the brethren working for the good of the community. It is the PR function to ensure they keep their charitable status.

One could argue that the benefit of having charitable status to the brethren is worth up to £35 million a year in the UK alone. A great return on investment! There is some irony in the fact that brethren members are denied the opportunity to join the Police, Fire Service or become Doctors, Nurses, Solicitors, Teachers, or a myriad of other professions!

Controversy

The exclusive Plymouth Brethren are controversial in their practice of separation. The allegations of ex-brethren members are substantial, and their voice is rarely heard.

It is difficult to understand for the wider public & government that over 99% of the brethren community are born into the brethren, they are educated in brethren schools, they do not attend college or university, they are protected from social media and the news, they are forbidden from attending restaurants or watching TV and they can't associate with non-brethren members. Their families are in the brethren, they attend the brethren meeting rooms numerous times a week. When they leave the brethren schools, they work in brethren owned companies. They shop in brethren ran shops. They are groomed to stay in the brethren and are informed that the world outside the brethren, is the world of the devil. Their future wife or husband will need approval of church elders, they will need approval of where they can live and where they can travel. Access to computers & mobile phones will come with strict controls on what they can access.

Leaving the brethren is difficult, it involves a leap into an alien world, leaving your job, your home, and your family. Imagine having no support network, no friends, no family, giving up your job, walking away from your home and your family, to survive in a world that, all your life you have been told is hell!

Under the safety net of religion, very few politicians and journalists are brave enough to investigate alleged brethren issues. The leadership of the church are reputed to use legal options to silence criticism.

Grooming someone from birth, making it extremely difficult to leave and having control over all aspects of their lives, is this just coercion and abuse?

The stories that the brave ex-brethren members share can be heartbreaking and often involve abuse, bullying, alcoholism, coercion, misogyny, homophobia, mental health issues and separation from their families. They talk about how the leadership has now become all about financial success and they talk about how the bible is manipulated to fit the leader's narrative. A leader who actively encourages political lobbying.

'Commercial Cult, Christian Church, Coercive Control?'

Abuse

We have found references and allegations of abuse within the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church. Ex-Brethren members report of being abused both sexually and mentally when they were in the brethren community.

Research by Jill Mytton in 2013 found that 27% of ex members surveyed had experienced some form of sexual abuse.

A recent video shows numerous ex- brethren voicing their experience and some highlighting the lack of action by the elders of the church. There are references to two court cases where brethren members have been convicted for sexual abuse of children.

Coercion

Coercion can be shown in different ways, it is a fundamental part of any cult. It enables the leader to manipulate his followers and to ensure that leaving a cult is difficult. The brethren's practice of shunning and ex-communicating leavers naturally can be seen as coercive.

Ex-brethren members talk about the difficult choices in making the decision to leave the brethren and losing their family, friends, house & job. The control of people's right to freedom is again coercive. The church claims that this is a family decision not to have contact with ex-brethren members. The fact that ex-members have lost their families would indicate a wider level of coercive control.

It is difficult for non-brethren people to comprehend that brethren are born into the cult and that they understand very little of life outside of the brethren. Members are consistently encouraged to shop at brethren stores, to volunteer for the Rapid Relief Team and for women within the brethren they are often expected to complete unpaid work in the Campus & Co stores. All levels of coercion.

Separation

The controversy involving the separation of families has dogged the Plymouth Brethren for decades. It has seen families split and led to heartbreaking stories of ex-members being unable to see grandchildren or attend weddings of sons & daughters and funerals of mothers and fathers. It has seen children moved to the other side of the world separated from their parents, even whilst the family are all still in the brethren.

To comprehend the brethren, practice of separation from the world and their belief in the Rapture, we need to understand a little of their history.

They are taught to believe that they are God's chosen ones and will be rescued and taken to heaven by God at the end of time. They are told that the world is sinful. That the non-brethren population are evil. That they are better than everyone else. It can be seen as a coercive fear tactic by the leader of the brethren, the so-called Man of God.

The current leader is Bruce Hales a Sydney based businessman. Hales is the seventh leader of the Plymouth Brethren, though it must be noted that the brethren have had many schisms since being founded in the 1800's by John Nelson Darby and that the Hales led Exclusive Plymouth Brethren should not be confused with other offshoots, such as the Open brethren.

Since the 1950's the Exclusive Plymouth brethren have been evangelical in their separation. This level of separation is the enduring theme under the reign of the last four leaders Bruce Hales, his father John Hales, James Symington and James Taylor Jnr. Taylor Jnr started some of the strict separation which has been built on over the last 60 years. It could be argued that the Exclusive Plymouth Brethren today have little in common with the Plymouth Brethren founded by John Nelson Darby. Hales has developed many controls to avoid the schisms that have occurred previously in the brethren. An example would be where business owners who have left the brethren have lost their own companies.

In essence leaving the brethren means leaving behind homes, jobs, family & friends and entering a strange world without that support from loved ones. Leavers are shunned by members of the group because ex-brethren members are viewed as having chosen the devil over God, and creating a risk that they may bring members into contact with the sinful world. The Brethren have been accused of using their considerable wealth and power to 'punish' members who have decided to leave the church and to have allegedly actively used their influence to split families up to protect Brethren interests.

The 'party' line from the Plymouth Brethren when questioned over separation, is to trot out that it is the individual choice of those remaining within the brethren, whether to keep contact with leavers.

Homophobia

The Plymouth Brethren oppose gay marriage, there are claims from more than one leaver that when coming out within the brethren, that they were sent for castration medication. It would appear near impossible to stay within the brethren once a member declared they were gay. It is viewed as a sin by the brethren to be gay. Gay leavers report that they were bullied and threatened.

Each year the Grace Trust support a select number of non-brethren charities with small donations. The total of these donations is less than 0.5% of the income of the Grace Trust. What is noticeable is that there are no donations to any LGBT related charities.

Alcoholism

The consumption of alcohol is allowed within the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church. It is reported by leavers that even young children under the age of 5 are given alcohol within the Lord's meeting on a Sunday. There have been church members convicted of drink driving. Leavers tell of a culture where the drinking of whisky and other high ABV spirits is common throughout the brethren.

Leavers allege that many inside the brethren drink to escape being stuck inside the cult. Alcohol can allegedly be consumed in quantity on a Saturday night, to a level that would mean those driving to the 6.00am Sunday Lord's meeting would be likely to be over the drink drive limit in the countries where they reside. They also report that drinking is common throughout the day on a Sunday in between the visits to meeting rooms. The impact of drink driving has sadly cost the lives of brethren members and impacted on the non-brethren population who have been unfortunate to be involved in road traffic accidents with brethren members over the limit.

It is also widely reported by leavers that many members of the brethren are also likely to be on anti-depressants and that allegedly church leader Bruce Hales once stated half the brethren are on anti-depressants and the other half should be on them!

Misogyny

The Plymouth Brethren is male dominated. Females are known as sisters. It can be shown that for the circa 200 registered brethren charities in the UK, each with between 3 to 5 trustees, that there isn't one female trustee!

Females on leaving the OneSchool Global system are usually employed as administration staff within brethren owned companies. Once they are given the approval to marry and have children, they become responsible for the raising of the children and the household duties. There are restrictions on birth control, and it is not unusual to see large brethren families with 4 to 12 children.

In recent years, many are encouraged to work as unpaid volunteers in school time at the Brethren Campus & Co stores. They are also encouraged to volunteer to work unpaid for the Rapid Relief Team. The structure of many brethren companies on Companies House, shows just the male family members as directors of the main trading company. Though where there is a holding company it is likely to include sisters as shareholders. Which is very tax efficient. Leavers report that male brethren in brethren members companies would never have a female brethren or non-brethren directly above them as a direct manager.

In summary the sister's duty is to raise the family, volunteer their services, be a tax efficient shareholder and never to preach within the confines of the male dominated brethren meeting rooms. It is strange that in the 21st century, we still have this level of misogyny.

Bullying

Bullying in the brethren is common according to ex-brethren members. It is often defined by the wealth of different brethren families, based on brethren "class" system. The children of wealthier brethren members pick on the poorer brethren children in the OneSchool system, the trustees and administrators of the schools often being the wealthiest brethren business owners. It happens when travelling to school on brethren owned buses, it continues in school and in meeting rooms. It is also reported that the same bullying persists in adult brethren.

Lobbying

It is not unusual to find political figures linked to Brethren members. We have found pictures of UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, visiting a brethren owned company in his constituency. Former UK Home Secretary Suella Braverman visiting a brethren owned company in her constituency and the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer Jeremy Hunt answering questions at a OneSchool Global campus in his constituency. We have Lindsay Hoyle, the Speaker of the House with brethren members in the House of Commons.

The Plymouth Brethren are very good lobbyists, if somewhat less competent in their attempts to influence political elections. Courting controversy in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, UK, Sweden & the USA. In elections from 2004-2019.

Summary

The exclusive branch of the Plymouth Brethren led by Australian Bruce Hales, is an extreme evangelical sect that consider themselves as the chosen ones. They live in communities within normal society but minimize contact with non-community members. Under the Hales leadership they have become a commercially focused cult. One could certainly argue that Hales uses Christianity as an 'umbrella' to assist in coercing the members of the community for commercial gain.

The eco-system that Hales has developed over the last 20+ years bares very little, if any resemblance to the Plymouth Brethren started by J N Darby. It is of note that the once technology resistant brethren are now prolific in their use of systems that enable monitoring and tracking of the everyday lives of their members. A child born into the brethren today can expect a life that will be more sheltered from the wider world than ever before, the education will be via OneSchool, their careers will involve working for a brethren owned company, often with inflated salaries. They will be encouraged to marry early and to purchase large, detached properties that are approved by local elders. The system provides Hales with a level of coercion, as for any member doubting the doctrine it means leaving the brethren entails giving up employment, homes, family & friends to journey out into an alien world.

The monitoring of internet & phone usage through technology that must be purchased via UBT ensures that members have little privacy or the ability to research or question the doctrine. Failure to follow this doctrine can result in the archaic practice of shutting up and potentially ex-communication.

A secretive coercive cult that by nature can control & hide abuse. One that is active in political lobbying, one that utilizes religion to gain financial gain through their charitable status, whilst the Hales continue to accumulate incredible wealth. The structure of the ecosystem also provides cover to increase this wealth.

Where trustees of the schools or meeting rooms are encouraged to purchase services from Hales family-owned companies. Where businesses are encouraged to use UBT & to shop in Campus & Co stores. Where donations to the system are consistently and frequently requested. A system that is monitored and can highlight members not following both religious doctrine and more importantly not following commercial doctrine. A system that operates with the fear of Hales as the dominant factor in decision making.

A system that uses the Rapid Relief Team as both a PR exercise and networking operation. Giving credence to the belief that they are a charitable, caring Christian church. The reality is that the RRT is simply a commercial investment scheme that delivers an incredible ROI. There is huge irony in the fact the brethren members are prevented from becoming a Doctor, a Nurse, a Firefighter, a Teacher, a Social worker, a Civil servant, a lawyer, or any other public service role, whilst simultaneously RRT is promoting itself as a charity that supports many of these professions.

The Plymouth Brethren Christian Church could be viewed as a 'Ponzi Scheme' where investors at the bottom never get a return, whilst the Hales family and cohorts at the top receive huge financial returns. A cult that controls its members through a combination of fear and coercion. One that is protected from religious attack by government rules, from public disclosure via the cloak of being a charitable Christian church and from any opposers through litigation. A cult that sees all non-members as the devil and as "Egyptians to be fleeced".

In simple terms we suggest that the Exclusive Plymouth Brethren is a former religious sect, that has been hijacked and is now nothing more than a commercial cult for the benefit of the Hales family and their acolytes.