

The world has many different religions, most popular among which is the Christian religion with over two billion followers, about half of whom are Catholic. One relatively small evangelical close-knit Christian group is the Brethren consisting of the Open Brethren and the Exclusive Brethren.

The Exclusive Brethren, who separated from the Open Brethren in 1848, adhere to a rigid code of practice that among other things restricts the contact their members can have with those outside their group. The Open Brethren believe that their individual churches should have freedom in their dealings with others. The two groups remain separate and do not hold joint events.

Exclusive Brethren was originally the name given to the group by the popular press, although today for reasons of consistency, legality, and to differentiate themselves from other groups they now prefer to be called by what they describe as their historic name, the "Plymouth Brethren Christian Church" or "PBCC" for short. To this end, their official global website, www.plymouthbrethrenchristianchurch.org/ was established in 2012.

Worldwide there are some 50,000 Exclusive Brethren located in France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Denmark, Holland, Switzerland, Sweden, North and South America, UK, Australia and New Zealand. In New Zealand there are at present at least 6,000 Exclusive Brethren, which is about three times their estimated numbers in 2006, although exact figures are not available. The majority of local Exclusive Brethren live in Wellington's northern corridor.

Although a discrete group, or perhaps better described as reclusive and elusive, the Exclusive Brethren gained uncanny headlines in New Zealand over their controversial role in the 2005 General Election when they ran a campaign opposing the Labour government and funding an anti-government pamphlet drop.

Presumably, they were attempting to achieve economic conditions for their congregation of mainly business people.

The Wellington Exclusive Brethren has a growing congregation of over 300 members who at present use temporary premises in Linden as their Church. It fits the description of their typical church with its frosted windows, high security fence and no signage on the premises.

Exclusive Brethren children attend Plymouth Brethren Christian Westmount schools. The local Johnsonville School (Decile 8) has about 100 students from Year 3 to 13. Education is conducted as per the New Zealand curriculum. Their schools get very good reports. Parents take a very active interest in the education of their children. Most have no tertiary education and typically work for one of the many small businesses run by Exclusive Brethren members. These businesses are well regarded and their owners are seen as fair, honest and reliable.

While their schools are registered as Independent Schools with a Special Religious Character, no formal religious observances or services are held at the school. Current affairs and Bible Studies programmes are the responsibility of the community. This is very interesting as the students are sitting in classes where they could be receiving religious instruction. However, the Special Character will permeate everything within the school.

Exclusive Brethren regard the Darby translation of the Bible as the absolute, infallible, inspired word of God. It defines their beliefs, morality and code of conduct. It is their essential companion and authoritative guide. From their earliest childhood, members are read and taught Bible stories. This is the

only permitted book within the household as it contains the word of God. Other reading material is supplied in the form of pamphlets which are to be bought monthly. These generally contain doctrine, based around Biblical passages (<http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-Salient33101970-t1-body-d28.html>)

Exclusive Brethren largely shun the “conduits of evil communications” such as television, radio and the internet. This, however, cuts them off from the real world and means that they receive a particular version of what the outside world is.

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Exclusive Brethren separate themselves from others due to their belief that the world is a place of wickedness and mostly restrict their social activities to interactions with other Exclusive Brethren. They congregate every Sunday in their meeting rooms to celebrate the Lord’s Supper and to preach the Gospel. Meeting places are surrounded by high fences and locked gates that are locked at all times except for access to meetings. They are also locked during meetings. They also use security guards on occasions.

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They follow a rigid code of conduct based strictly on the Bible, with a firm moral framework focused on the family unit. They are encouraged to marry early, avoid contraception and believe in strong family values and relationships. They value the extended family and prefer their ageing members to remain in their own homes.

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The Exclusive Brethren demonstrate some cult-like characteristics such as totalitarian control of their members’ behaviour and autocratic leadership where the leader is regarded as the supreme authority. When a member is “under discipline” they are typically not permitted to take part in the Lord’s Supper and occasionally they may be asked to leave the Church.

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In my opinion, their growth should not be of concern to mainstream religions other than they do make it hard for members to leave the group and use intimidation or threats to keep members. Anyone leaving the Exclusives is regarded as serious, which the sect does its best to prevent. They attempt to prevent this by holding long sermons warning of the dangers of the world.

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I have noticed that the Exclusive Brethren maintain that their ex-members are usually dismissed as disgruntled or envious or immoral people with an axe to grind. This may be true, but if these ex-members consistently tell the same story, their stories must have some truth.

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