

Church of cruelty

Palmerston North woman Ngaire Thomas has opened the door on the secretive Exclusive Brethren community. She talks to Sarah Boyd.



Shunned: Ngaire Thomas has told of her experiences in the Exclusive Brethren in her new book *Behind Closed Doors*.
Picture: KENT BLECHYNDEN

NGAIRE Thomas has finally stopped being afraid of the Exclusive Brethren. She left the church 30 years ago but it's only now, with her just-published book, *Behind Closed Doors*, in her hands, that the 61-year-old feels free.

She knows publication is only the beginning and this week, as she expected, she received a legal letter from the Exclusive Brethren threatening to sue her unless she withdraws the book. They say she's harming their reputation. She says she's been kind to them.

The Exclusive Brethren was her upbringing, providing her with a close-knit network around the country, and she's tried to portray positive aspects along with the negative. Other ex-members she's had contact with had a worse time and would have written a much harsher book.

"Left to my own devices, I wouldn't be so compassionate about it but I, too, have an agenda. I would love to see healing from inside the church. I would love to see the women set free. And that's not going to happen if I attack them."

Both she and her husband were born Exclusive Brethren, though her own mother had not been and gave up much of her contact with her own parents when she married.

An independent spirit from an early age, Ngaire found many of the rules hard to take, particularly, as a teenager, the puritanical attitude toward sex and the ban on tertiary education. She had to stay at home till she married and did so at 18. Her husband, Denis, was always more comfortable with the church than her.

They quickly had children - any form of family planning being banned - and it was after the fourth that Ngaire began secretly taking the contraceptive pill. After a few years her failure to produce another child was questioned by people within the church and her actions were revealed.

Though she had to go off the pill - and quickly became pregnant - the incident was the beginning of the family's split with the church. They were 'shut up' - a state of limbo where people's lives are closely scrutinised by the church and they are not allowed to participate in church activities. If they are not accepted back in, it's known as being 'withdrawn from'.

Once someone leaves or is withdrawn from by the church, they are not permitted to see or talk to those remaining inside even children or family.

If one partner is withdrawn from, legal separation papers are quickly prepared, "ensuring that the Exclusive Brethren retain control of the remaining partner and usually a substantial portion of their finances," she says.

Church members are expected to pass their former friends in the street without acknowledgment. This is the cruellest aspect of Exclusive Brethren life, Mrs Thomas says. She believes it's what keeps many women in the community, despite a severely restricted lifestyle, because they cannot risk being cut off from their family members.

She got to a point where she wanted to leave but would have stayed for her husband's sake if she'd been able to have a bit more freedom. In fact the rules just kept tightening and in 1974 she was not considered sufficiently repentant and they were ex-communicated.

The adjustment to life outside was tough, especially for her husband, who wavered about going back. Her oldest son, 11 when they left, has since told her he would have returned if his father had. As it was, the family remained intact and her children now thank her for getting out.

Its thought there are about 5000 Exclusive Brethren in New Zealand and between 30,000 and 45,000 worldwide.

The movement emerged out of the Church of England in the 1820s, among a group of people determined to be led by the holy spirit rather than by ordained clergy. It was the early leader, John Nelson Darby, who laid down the doctrine of separation from evil, which developed into separation from all others, including other Christians.

The rules Exclusive Brethren are expected to live by have changed over the years depending on who has been at 'the head of the movement. That person is known as Man of God, or MOG in Mrs Thomas' book (and she's heard that name has spread across the world).

The rules tightened about 1959 to a stricter fundamentalism, including a total ban on eating or any kind of socialising

'I think it's wonderful that the young people are sneaking around with cellphones. Some are going to the movies. It shows they're becoming normal.'
Ngaire Thomas

She says as individuals, Brethren tend to be "good, obedient but simple-minded people" who live quiet lives separate from the rest of the community. Unemployment doesn't exist because they work in each other's businesses.

They attend meetings on week nights and several on Sundays. These consist of thanksgiving, preaching, hymns and discussion, with the men doing the talking. Children must sit quietly and women don't have a role.

"They are the chief cook and bottle washer, barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen," says Mrs Thomas.

When she was growing up, Brethren children attended state schools, though they were not allowed to attend some classes and banned from reading certain books. In the past few years the church has established a network of private schools to cater for students from form one - and they are often homeschooled. till then. It's a trend that worries Mrs Thomas.

"The teaching of the church is so narrow, so if they have their own schools, it becomes even more narrow."

Exclusive Brethren have no TVs, radios, computers or cellphones, though she's heard of young people finding ways of breaking the rules.

"I think it's wonderful that the young people are sneaking around with cellphones. Some are going to the movies. It shows they're becoming normal. It only needs enough of them to be doing that and things will have to change."

Mrs Thomas maintains she does not want to see the church destroyed, but changed from within. She began writing about it in 1999 and first had her book self-published. It sold 1000 copies without any advertising and then publishers Random House picked it up. Each step has been scary because she's felt increasingly exposed.

She's also become a **contact for former** church members who want to tell their stories, many of them horrific tales of being cast out of family networks. She suspects that role will only grow but everything she's heard has made her feel stronger. "I'm speaking up and I'm hurting, for all the people that they've hurt. I'm not going to back down."

Behind Closed Doors, by Ngaire Thomas
(Random House, pb \$34.95)

