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Sect 'brainwashed boy against dad'

By Matthew Denholm

The Australian (28.01.2009) / HRWF Int. (28.01.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A father of eight has told a court that the Exclusive Brethren sect "brainwashed" and "pressured" his young son to turn against him.

The Tasmanian man, who left the sect and his Brethren wife in 2003, obtained Family Court orders in 2006 that the two youngest children have fortnightly access visits at his new home.

However, the access visits stopped in early 2007 in defiance of the court orders and he has seen the children -- a girl aged 10 and a boy aged 15 -- only briefly since.

The father, who like all centrally involved in the case cannot be identified by law, yesterday told the Family Court it was clear the only way to see his children was to seek full-time custody.

"The only way the children will have a relationship with both parents is if they live with me," he said.

Their mother, who remains in the Brethren and has terminal cancer, is seeking to retain custody and have the father's access rights revoked. Her counsel, led by Melbourne-based QC Noel Ackman, later put it to the father that his motivation in seeking custody related to his hostility to the Brethren.

Mr Ackman suggested to the father that he should know that by leaving their mother's custody, the children would leave the Brethren fold -- the world they knew -- and that this could be painful.

"You didn't leave the faith until you were 46 ... that's a lot older than 15 and 10," Mr Ackman told the father, who is representing himself.

Mr Ackman suggested the father was "putting what's best for the children last", particularly given that they knew their mother would eventually die of her illness.

However, the father denied this, arguing it was in the children's best interests to have a relationship with both parents and to finish growing up outside the Brethren's strict codes.

While the children would leave behind social aspects of Brethren life, he remained a Christian faithful to some of the sect's beliefs, he told judge Sally Brown.

The court heard that the 15-year-old boy had shunned his father on several meetings, covering his eyes, walking away and, during one visit, climbing a tree and lying in a fetal position.

However, the father said such reactions were the result of "pressure" and "brainwashing" from the Brethren and usually did not last long into a visit. "I think he was spoken to -- brainwashed -- to behave in that manner," the father said.

He produced a photo album to reinforce his claim that the children had enjoyed happy visits with him and his new wife before access visits were halted in violation of court orders.

The Exclusive Brethren, a secretive Christian sect that seeks a life for its followers separate to that of the general community, prevents followers from socialising or even eating with non-members.
