

Sect elder rues 'harsh' exclusion

BY DOUG CONWAY

23/09/2008 12:00:00 AM

An elder of the controversial Exclusive Brethren religious sect says he feels sorry for his 85-year-old sister, who did not see four of her sect children for 20 years after being excommunicated.

But he says animosity to the group has "blinded" his sister, who has described the sect as "grossly evil".

Sydney man David Stewart said the Exclusive Brethren had apologised for its "harsh" treatment of his sister, Alison Alderton, and her late husband, Bob, when they were leading figures in the group at Bathurst, NSW, in the early 1980s.

But she had refused invitations to rejoin the Brethren, described last year by Labor Leader Kevin Rudd as an "extremist cult" that broke up families.

"I feel sorry for her," Mr Stewart said.

"I feel sorry for the four [of her six] children still in the fellowship, because their mother has really shafted them and their sisters, too.

"But the poor lady's thoughts and mind are blinded by her animosity towards the fellowship."

The Alderton case has been raised in a new book, *Behind the Exclusive Brethren*.

Mr Stewart said his sister's case was one of a number revisited in 2002 after Sydney man Bruce Hales became leader of the Church which has 43,000 adherents worldwide, including 15,000 in Australia.

"Some cases were dealt with rather harshly in a way they certainly wouldn't be dealt with today," he said.

"That included my brother-in-law and sister."

Also harshly treated, he said, was the Alderton's daughter Sophie, who was excommunicated as a married woman after having an affair with another Brethren man.

"That case again would be very differently treated today," Mr Stewart said. "I would say that today that wouldn't become public among the Brethren.

"It would be dealt with by the elders who would work with her to restore her soul and bring in healing.

"If those circumstances arose again today, I doubt very much they would have been excluded from the Church."

Mr Stewart said the Aldertons spent 20 years denigrating the Church "far and wide".

But he said the Church still went back and said, "You were wrongly dealt with the first time: we're sorry for that."

Another elder, Daniel Hales, said the group was not trying to silence Ms Alderton.

He said Brethren members were not discouraged from maintaining contact with family outside the fellowship, despite the sect's "separation" policy.

"We don't live in communes," he said. AAP

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