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Veiled sect hails Bush, Martinez

By LUCY MORGAN, Times Tallahassee Bureau Chief
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TALLAHASSEE - A mysterious committee backed by members of a secretive religious group whose members are forbidden to vote spent more than \$500,000 on newspaper ads last year supporting President Bush and U.S. Senate candidate Mel Martinez.

The Thanksgiving 2004 Committee raised the money from residents of 18 states, plus \$377,262 from Bruce Hazell of London, England. None of the money was raised in Florida, according to a report filed with the Federal Elections Commission.

The group of men who formed the committee belong to the Exclusive Brethren, a reclusive religious group with roots in England and Australia. The group includes members from Knoxville, Tenn., Omaha, Neb., and other U.S. cities. Members of the Exclusive Brethren do not vote, read newspapers, watch television or participate in the outside world, according to published reports. So why would they care who gets elected in the United States?

That's hard to say and members contacted by the *St. Petersburg Times* wouldn't say anything except to praise President Bush and say they wanted to see him re-elected.

Steve Truan, owner of a Knoxville map store, was listed as the contact person for the group, which formed just days before the November election. He said the group likes to "fly beneath the radar" and refused to talk about the ads, all of which were placed by a Knoxville advertising agency whose owners refused to answer questions.

Calls to other members of the group were not returned.

Hazell, reached at his London office last week, said he is a member of the Brethren. He said the reasons he donated so much money to an American election committee were complicated and offered to explain later. When a reporter called him at the appointed hour, a secretary said Hazell "just popped out" and wouldn't be back until next week. "He had to suddenly

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rush out," she said.

The ads included a full page in the *New York Times* and a smaller one in the *Tampa Tribune* supporting the president, and a quarter-page ad in the *St. Petersburg Times* endorsing Republican Mel Martinez for U.S. Senate because of his support for traditional marriage.

Both campaigns denied knowing anything about the committee or its members.

"The president thought we had gotten rid of this kind of shadowy activity," said White House spokesman Taylor Gross. "I have never heard of this group."

"We are clueless on this one," said Martinez Senate spokeswoman Melissa Shuffield.

The ads were placed by Dougherty & Associates, a Knoxville advertising agency that refused to provide details on where the ads were purchased or how much they cost. The committee paid the agency almost \$530,000. The only other expenditure noted in reports filed last month was \$982 to a Michigan printer for door hanger ads.

The Brethren are thought to have about 50,000 members, mostly in England and Australia. They are Christians and stay apart from anyone who does not follow Exclusive Brethren teaching. Members do not make friends in the outside world and have traditionally shut out family members who are caught having contact with worldly things like rock music, television or non-members.

Former members say the Brethren offer a family-centered way of life. Members often work in Brethren-owned businesses. They meet in windowless rooms for long Sunday worship sessions that often begin at 6 a.m.

The group traces its origin to Ireland in the late 1820s when a group led by John Nelson Darby left the established Church of Ireland because they felt it was too involved with the secular world.

Placing the political ads is "the first time I've known this to happen in the history of the movement," says Ian Markham, professor of theology and ethics and dean of the Hartford Seminary in Connecticut. Markham's interest in the group is personal: His parents were members and he was born into it. He says his father took his family and left the group about 30 years ago.

"They've always had a strong sense of separation from the world which God has likely handed over to Satan," Markham said.

Markham says he might have many cousins and other family still in the group, but he can't be sure because the Brethren allow no contact with them.

Markham and others who have looked at the group say Bruce Hales, the Australian who is its international leader, may be encouraging some contact with the outside world. In recent months some former members

have heard from members who have encouraged them to return.

The Brethren have often been criticized for policies that separate family members, sometimes forbidding children and parents from contact with each other.

Markham belonged to the group in England but knows of an uncle who settled in the United States and says there is a "significant branch in the United States." He said he occasionally hears from former members who tell him about family members still in the group. "But I'm the dean of a liberal progressive seminary, the worst of all worlds in their view," Markham said. "They take the view that those of us who have seen the light and rejected it are worse than those who have never seen the light."

In one of their rare exchanges with the outside world, the Brethren in London publicly opposed the European Union and mandatory education rules that would have forced them to enroll their children in secular schools. Most members home-school their children or send them to private schools run by the Exclusive Brethren, which also has been known as Plymouth Brethren.

The Thanksgiving Committee was formed Oct. 25, four days after the deadline for reporting pre-election campaign expenditures. A report listing contributions was filed Dec. 3. It listed contributions from various other states, but none from Florida. After the election the committee reported a cash balance of \$107,880.

--Times researchers Kitty Bennett, John Martin and Carolyn Edds contributed to this report.

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