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## THE PRESS STORY

### Brethren enter new age

10 September 2005

By DAVID KING

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**The Exclusive Brethren Church is finally entering the computer age, but critics fear it is just another way for the secretive organisation to tighten its grip on members' finances.**

Computers, along with radios, televisions and faxes, have been forbidden by the church which encourages its members to keep themselves separate from the rest of society.

In particular Brethren, who have hit the headlines after funding an anti-Labour and Greens campaign, feared computers would allow "the devil" into peoples' lives.

"They have this saying that the man of sin or the anti-Christ will appear on the screen," an Exclusive Brethren Church member told The Press.

Despite shunning modern technology Brethren members are canny business operators – a number of well known Christchurch businesses are Brethren-owned – who have thrived with the help of "worldly" subcontractors such as accountants who have been able to do the computer work for them.

In what looks like a major departure from the past, the Exclusive Brethren have set up "National Office Assist", a centralised computer system that will keep business information within the church, without the need for "reliance on unsatisfactory worldly sub-contract services".

The computers will be controlled from four regions globally,

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although the church has promised to keep business information completely confidential.

The system allowed Brethren to run their businesses in a more efficient manner without the need to own computers or employ people directly to operate them.



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"All equipment will be owned and operated by National Office Assist and no authority us given for individual businesses to purchase their own computer equipment," the church has told members.

But a Brethren source said the centralised system was a sinister development.

"It's absolutely monumental for the church (to be buying computers)."

The source said the alarming thing was the access it would give to members' financial information.

"It's not a church, it's a big money scam. This is just another way of controlling people."

According to former members, Brethren are under constant pressure to give to the church, particularly for new schools and halls.

The source said the Brethren had thrived in business because they were focused.

"They don't have a lot to focus on outside of work. Whatever they do they put everything into it."

Ngairé Thomas, a former Brethren member who has written a book exposing the workings of the church, also believed the computer system sounded alarming.

"It increases the power and the control of the church. It ties up not only the business, but those people who work for the business.

"The church knows not only how much the business makes,

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it will know how much everybody earns."

The Press approached Doug Watt, who runs OMC Power Equipment in Christchurch, for comment after being told he was the church's head in the city.

Watt denied he was head of the Exclusive Brethren Church in Christchurch, but said in a written reply: "I have no further comment to make suffice to say that using disaffected persons as a source will allow you to spread false information."

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