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Dear Bruce,

Surely the below report can't be true, can it?

Could you please adapt it into what you'd regard as a true report so that I can pacify many non-brethren who're very concerned about it

Thanks

'UK-based psychologist Jill Mytton – who was born into the Brethren but left in 1960 when she was 16 – recently surveyed former worldwide members of the Church and found 27 per cent of a large sample of 264 reported being sexually abused as children'.

McCorkell had not yet rejoined the Brethren when Jensen abused the two young sisters. But when the case ultimately ended up in court, he was drafted into the attempted cover-up. The Brethren minimised the role of the Church, produced diversionary timelines and media statements, and used legal threats to journalists and others to try to deflect attention from Hales and the Church.

"I had several phone conversations with Bruce Hales about the Jensen case," McCorkell says. "I think he was genuinely, at the time, mortified by it ... But our conversations were about protecting the Church. We knew it was a bad look.

"Ultimately there would have been two considerations for Bruce Hales: 'One: How do we make sure that this doesn't blow up into a major story? Two: How can we look after these people?' That was not just about his benevolent spirit; it was also to try to discourage the victims from speaking out."

When Robert Jones complained to the local Brethren leaders in New Zealand that he had been serially molested as a boy, Hales dispatched McCorkell to shut him down.*

Jones was seven when his parents were kicked out of the Brethren in 1975. He was sent to live with a Brethren uncle and his wife, who had no children of their own. The abuse started slowly, in the garden, when the uncle put Jones on his knee. "It wasn't a daily thing," Jones recalls, "but it would be: 'Oh, Robert's got a cold, I'll stay home with him from church,' or, 'Oh, I've got a sales trip up north, Robert can come along, it will be an experience for him.' But it was so he could have a little fondle while he was driving along in the car."

The boy lived like this for four or five years. The final 24 months were the worst. "Let's just say I never knew anything about an ejaculation until he did it," Jones says now. "It didn't go any further than that ... but it was something I knew was absolutely wrong."

He left the Brethren for the first time when he was 17, but could not cope in the outside world. After three months, he came back. That was when he told a Church elder that he'd been abused.

"They didn't do anything," Jones said. "They knew [my uncle] had a problem. He had been booted out of the Church for a prior incident with another boy when I was a tiny tot ... Much later, Mum told me she'd known. She'd told the priests she didn't think I was in a safe environment. And they did nothing. They did nothing at all. They put me straight into the lion's den."

In the 40 years since, Jones has struggled. His longest relationship lasted seven years. He has had trouble communicating with women. He's lived in 43 different houses. He's been bankrupt twice, experimented with drugs. In 2007, facing financial problems again, Jones approached the Church a second time. He was looking for compensation. The local elders referred the matter to Sydney.

McCorkell by then had become Bruce Hales' right-hand man. They were seen travelling together to Church meetings in a private jet (with Hales's full-time security guard). They drank freely from Hales's supplies of Blue Label whisky, and McCorkell admits to having pocketed a small portion of the cash delivered as gifts from the Brethren in white envelopes.

McCorkell flew to NZ to meet Jones. He'd heard Jones's claims that the Brethren had knowingly put him with an abuser. He listened to Jones' story, and his demand for money. Then he effectively washed the Church's hands of the matter: "This is a family issue, it needs to be dealt with within the family." His words, as with everything he said in those days, had been approved by Bruce Hales. McCorkell was just as firm in stifling another claim in Brisbane. As a girl in 1966, Elva Thrush suffered an asthma attack, a bad one. She should have been in hospital. Instead, her father took her to the house of the local Brethren doctor. At the time, the Brethren's world leader was an American pig farmer, Jim Symington. He was opposed to Brethren seeking medical help from "worldly" places, and Thrush's father, a "very righteous" man, would never step out of line.

As Thrush wheezed and worked for her next breath, the doctor gave her an injection, then settled in by the bed. "He was by my side for most of the night, and during the night, things happened that shouldn't have," she recalls, her voice shaking. "I remember he said to me; 'This will make you feel better.' I was fairly naive. You are in there. There's no sex education. You don't name your body parts. In my mind, all my life, it's still been a big question mark why [he] did that."

About eight years later, Thrush left the Brethren.

A few years after that, she wrote to her father to tell him what had happened. Her father asked the doctor, who denied it. The big man had spoken and there the matter rested.

In about 2007 or 2008, Thrush became aware that the doctor was now the senior Brethren man in his city. Incensed, she complained again, this time to the Sydney leaders. It was McCorkell who responded.

"I made an uncompromising phone call," McCorkell says now. "I said, 'I advise you to go to the police. If you ... choose to take it through the legal channels, you're welcome to do it, but [the doctor] would vigorously defend the situation and it's most likely in your best interest to weigh it up.'" Elva Thrush recalls the conversation, too. "He put me in my place," she says. "I felt bullied by it. It was the same old story; they would never listen to me."

Twice in McCorkell's time, at his insistence, sex offenders handed themselves over to the police. In both cases it was partly to calm public or media scrutiny of their cases. But that doesn't mean the men told the full truth. In one case, in Australia, a leader of his region who had helped set up the Brethren school admitted only that he had helped his victim by holding his penis as he urinated. In reality, says McCorkell, this powerful elder had so badly traumatised the boy that the child had mutilated his own body. The perpetrator was shunned briefly, then allowed to return to fellowship. To this day, he and the victim attend the same church.

Twice McCorkell organised to pay the phone and power bills of victims on an ad hoc basis, to keep them "on side". And silent. Their abusers, meanwhile, might be shunned for a few months before being allowed to return, after what was the "equivalent of ... a holiday", McCorkell says. Another victim was told there would be "a reward in heaven" for her silence.

Until about 15 years ago, owning a fax machine was an excommunicable offence. Questioning the leader still is.

"Whether we were pointing them to the police or not, the priority was always the reputation of the Church," says McCorkell.

The two young girls in the regional NSW town broke all the rules. They did something nobody had done before: they themselves reported to the "worldly" authorities what had happened to them. To the horror of Hales and the entire closed society, they pursued their complaints right through the court system.

But the pressure on them was intense. After the younger sister had come forward, two senior Church women had interviewed them both: the elder girl once, the younger twice. They had been pressed for every detail, their stories relayed back to the Sydney leadership. According to McCorkell, this is where it would normally have ended: the perpetrator probably would have been "kicked out for immorality" for a short time and the girls "shipped off to the US [where they had relatives] and nobody would have been any the wiser".

Instead, the girls' mother sought help from a non-Brethren counsellor. The counsellor notified the NSW Department of Community Services, which made its own inquiries. The mother was denounced immediately. "It would be better for a millstone to be hung around your neck and for you to be cast into the depths of the sea rather than go to the police," one woman told her.

In August 2003, Jensen was "shut up" – excluded from Brethren society – over the allegations. Serious pressure immediately came from the local community to reinstate him. The girls were labelled "sinful liars". People threw rocks at them, egged their house. Groups of young men would bash or rock cars they were travelling in, or drive fast at them as they walked. An elder came from Melbourne specifically to yell at the girls' mother.

It was a painfully public campaign. It often happened in the grounds of their church. Everyone, even the smallest boys, would taunt and torment the girls. No one stepped in to help them. The girls began avoiding the meetings, earning more rebukes. But still their mother refused to take their case to the police.

"Throughout the discussions, [the mother] spoke of the influence the Church has on her life and that of her children," a social worker noted. "[She] stated, in front of both [girls], that she is of the belief that the law and legal system is something that you abide by but that you don't bring into your life even if the police are required. This is also the belief of the Church."

Soon it became clear that Jensen would be reinstated to fellowship. The girls both wrote desperate letters to Bruce Hales, begging him not to do it: "I cannot understand why you are bringing Lindsay into fellowship because he has ruined me," the younger girl wrote.

"She has lost faith in the Brethren," the elder girl wrote of her little sister. "She talks of... killing herself."

In December 2003, Jensen was restored to the Church. In a timeline later produced by local Brethren and released by McCorkell, the Church said it was because there was "no substantial witness" to the assaults. Jensen promptly went to a meeting at the Brethren school, where he remained a trustee. The older girl saw him there. The message could not have been clearer: in this world, fatherless girls and husbandless women had no voice; and they would never report the matter to police. But, two days later, they did just that.

Unlike the Brethren, the worldly authorities showed the girls kindness and respect. Even so, through the long hours spent making their statements, pursuant to the rules of their sect, both refused food and drink.

More indignities were to come. Their police statements were distributed to the elders of the Church to scrutinise and judge. The Brethren briefed a law firm to wrest guardianship of the older girl away from her mother. A relative stole a passport from their house in an attempt to remove her overseas.

The younger girl was nicknamed "Jezebel". Brethren surrounded her in public, chanting "Lindsay lover" and "harlot". She moved to another NSW town with her mother, but the stories followed her, and the bullying was unrelenting. She quit school and finished her education via correspondence.

In 2005, Jensen faced trial in the case of the older girl. His defence relied in part on the coerced note she had signed. As her case was being heard, a supporter of Jensen made 11 violent threats, including bombings and assaults, against the victims and the court itself. Jensen and the "bomber" were both found guilty and jailed.

In 2007, Jensen was sentenced to a second jail term, this time on five counts that included having sexual intercourse with a child under 10. In total, he was jailed for about four years. The Brethren promptly hired a lawyer in an attempt to have the evidence in the proceedings suppressed.

Jensen still denies any wrongdoing and his wife has stuck by him.

Brethren leader Bruce Hales has never answered any questions about the case. But he cannot pretend he was not personally involved. Between the ages of 10 and 13, the younger victim had no fewer than five meetings with him in his Sydney office. He sat across his boardroom table from the young girl and ran through every humiliating detail of the abuse committed against her.

In January 2006, 10 months before facing Jensen at her trial, the girl was summoned yet again. Hales lectured her about morals, and the clothes she wore. He described himself as "a bit like a judge" who "has to hear both sides and then give a judgement".

A real judge, Justice William Knight, who presided over the case of the older girl, had something to say about that: "Religious groups seem to feel that they have some particular right to avoid the responsibilities of the laws of the land. It annoys the tripe out of me."

The case shook the Church, McCorkell says now. The Brethren formulated a response – "a standard letter that tells complainants to take it to the police if they believe they have evidence". At least, that's what he was told: he never saw the letter, and the Brethren will not release any document to Good Weekend.

Asked a series of specific questions – about Jones, Thrush and the girls – the Brethren did not comment, citing the privacy of victims. However, a statement said the Brethren schools, which attract government funding, were "subject to the same child safety and reporting standards as other state, religious and independent schools and work closely with child safety authorities to ensure the safety of our children". (Exclusive Brethren children are not allowed to go to university, which means the sect trains no teachers. As a result, teachers at their six schools – which have 35 campuses across Australia – are non-Brethren.) The statement goes on to say: "The Church joins in the broader community's abhorrence for child sex abuse."

After a decade of bad publicity, the Exclusive Brethren has rebranded itself the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church and has started undertaking some charity work. Nothing else has changed. But the world around the Brethren has changed. Hales must have watched the grilling of Catholic Cardinal George Pell at the Royal Commission with alarm. Church elders must be petrified about the possibility that victims of the Brethren might come forward to tell their stories to the Royal Commission. They might be terrified Hales himself would be compelled to give evidence about what he's done, or failed to do, to protect the thousands of children over whose lives he controls. McCorkell has been out of the Brethren since 2009, but has had semi-regular contact with members of the Sydney leadership. Around the time of Pell's evidence, they called to remind him that he'd signed a confidentiality agreement. He has decided to speak out regardless. The Royal Commission has been in contact with him, and he is prepared to give evidence of his time in the sect. "I deeply regret my part in keeping the lid on this," he says. "I do think this needs to come out. Too much time has been spent covering these things up, and those responsible need to be held to account."

**Not his real name.*