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'Closed' church is not looking for brethren of fresh air

BY GARRICK ALDER

A secretive religious organisation is accused of claiming tax-exempt status on public property that it treats as private.

The Exclusive Brethren has meeting places in Bedford's Goldington Road and Barker's Lane.

Under the Places of Worship Act (1855) and the General Rate Act (1967) they claim these are exempt from paying propertybased taxes including council tax.

This is on the basis that their meeting halls are public places, like an Anglican church or a park.



Notices on the padlocked gates give telephone numbers for members of the public wanting to gain entry.

When a Bedfordshire on Sunday reporter rang, he was asked for the

spelling of his name, informed that his request was 'highly unusual' and given another number.

On that number, a secretary took his details and said someone would call back.

They never did.

One of the Brethren's neighbours, who asked not to be named, told this paper: "You will not be able to visit without being visited several times by Brethren to establish your motives.

"As a local taxpayer, I feel I am being defrauded." The Exclusive Brethren and the Open Brethren are the two 'wings' of a Christian Evangelical sect founded in 1820.

The two groups get their names from their attitude towards outsiders ('non-fellows').

Exclusive Brethren are not allowed to:

Live in semi-detached houses

Watch television or films, listen to radio or read books

Use computers, mobile telephones, or remote-controlled devices.

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Women are not allowed to cut their hair or wear jeans.

They must wear a headcovering while praying, so they wear it all day in case emergency prayers are needed.

Disobedient children are 'shut up' in their rooms, isolated from friends and family until they show a 'broken and contrite spirit'.

One ex-member has written about his treatment of his son under Brethren rules, saying: "I will have to bear the shame for the rest of my life."

We spoke to Bedford Borough Council about the Exclusive Brethren's tax-exempt status.

A borough council spokesman said: "The council levies business rates in accordance with the rating list supplied by the Valuation Office Agency, which is an executive agency of HM Revenue 'Closed' church is not looking for brethren of fresh air and Customs.

"It is up to the Valuation Office Agency to decide if such properties, as places of public religious worship, should be exempt from the rating list.

"We have therefore passed the information supplied by Bedfordshire on Sunday to the valuation office in order that they may review the exemption."

No-one from the Exclusive Brethren would comment on this story.

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