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Brethren's property buy-up

23Jul07

A SECRETIVE and controversial religious sect appears to be expanding south from its longstanding headquarters in the Unley area.

The Exclusive Brethren, which owns a \$3 million meeting hall in Mary St, Unley, is undergoing a massive expansion south of Adelaide, having bought up millions of dollars in property in the Happy Valley and Flagstaff Hill areas over the past four years.

The group's total property asset base south of the city is now worth at least \$9 million.

The group, whose members shun contact with outsiders and live by a set of strict rules, has used the Unley meeting hall for large gatherings for at least the past three decades. But with the group now owning a 1040-seat hall in Happy Valley, it appears the Exclusive Brethren may have new plans for its Unley property. Messenger Newspapers faxed a series of questions to senior Exclusive Brethren member Warwick Joyce, of Netherby, last week but did not receive a reply.

Elizabeth Edwards, who lives next door to the Mary St hall, said the Exclusive Brethren had stopped holding large meetings at the hall "about two months ago" but she believed they had no plans to sell the site. "They actually approached me about six weeks ago wanting to buy my place," she said.

"So they've obviously still got plans for this site."

The Exclusive Brethren own several properties which back on to the meeting hall, all of which appeared to be uninhabited when Messenger Newspapers doorknocked the area last week. The group's habit of buying up properties and then either knocking them down or leaving them vacant has been a cause of angst among some neighbours for several years. Irini Palios, who has lived in the area for about 10 years before moving out in 2000, described the group as "secretive and troublesome".

"They buy up these properties in a prime real estate area and then leave them vacant," she said. "It's no good for the area."

The Exclusive Brethren also owns a church in Laught Ave, Black Forest, a school for its members, Melrose Park School, and two houses in St Mary's.

A Messenger investigation into the group has revealed the following: The Exclusive Brethren has developed at least three hubs of property holdings, in Happy Valley, Unley and St Marys; The titles of the properties are controlled by trusts, run by leading members; and, Mr Joyce, 53, of Netherby, has been connected to a political advertisement currently being considered by the Australian Federal Police. The Exclusive Brethren in Adelaide has a tight-knit group of senior members who share a number of real estate and business connections.

A group of five leading members, Kevin Seeley, Colin Wright, Andrew Carman, Mark Joyce and Stephen Craig jointly own several properties, including a \$2.2 million meeting complex at Happy Valley and a \$3 million Unley meeting hall. Mr Seeley also shares ownership of the \$670,000 Melrose Park School, with Warwick Joyce and Bruce Hornsey. Mr Joyce has interests in several Exclusive Brethren companies, both in SA and interstate, while he also has been connected to the political advertisement being considered by the Australian Federal Police.

Another prominent Exclusive Brethren family is the Grace family.

Andrew Grace is a director of the Melrose Park School and is the person who authorised a political advertisement in the Eastern Courier that was booked by Mr Joyce before the last Federal Election.

His relatives, Alan and Kevin Grace, wrote written letters of support this year for the Brethren's development application at Flagstaff Hill, when it was being assessed by Onkaparinga's Development Assessment Panel. Stephen Selby, David Hack and Trevor Tunley own the Flagstaff Hill block and also a church in Black Forest.

The political advertisement, which attacked the Greens Party before the 2004 Federal Election, was referred to the AFP in May by the Australian Electoral Commission.

The AEC had been investigating whether payment for this advertisement and others interstate had been properly disclosed, a requirement under the Commonwealth Electoral Act.

A Messenger Newspapers investigation has learned Adelaide businessman Warwick Joyce, a senior member of the Exclusive Brethren, was involved in the anti-Greens advertisement and 10 others in Adelaide that supported the Liberal Party before the 2004 Federal Election.

Mr Joyce booked advertisements to appear in all Messenger Newspapers on October 6, 2004.

All 11 ads urged the re-election of Prime Minister John Howard.

The involvement of the 53-year-old Netherby man, who runs a Richmond-based machinery wholesale company and is also a director of an Exclusive Brethren school at St Marys, has not previously been disclosed.

When contacted about the ads earlier this month, Mr Joyce said he had acted on his own and stressed "the Brethren has nothing to do with this". When he was then asked why these advertisements were "authorised" by another Exclusive Brethren member who runs a school in Victoria, he said "that's a good question" and asked for further questions to be put to him in writing.

Mr Joyce failed to respond to a series of questions faxed to his home address, and did not return Messenger's calls before presstime.


The AEC was unaware last week of the involvement of Mr Joyce when contacted by Messenger Newspapers.



Exclusive Brethren property at Mary St, Unley.



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Advertising by the Exclusive Brethren originally was brought to the AEC's attention by Greens leader Senator Bob Brown, in September 2005, after he found pamphlets criticising his party were circulated in Tasmania before the 2005 election.

Mr Brown questioned whether the full expenditure for the pamphlets, and a number of political advertisements that ran in several NSW, Tasmanian and South Australian newspapers, had been disclosed to the AEC. A 12-month investigation into Mr Brown's claims concluded last year that all of the advertisements and pamphlets associated with the Exclusive Brethren were paid for and disclosed by a Sydney company, Willmac Enterprises. However, the AEC has since handed the case over to the AFP.

Mr Brown said voters deserved to know who was behind the advertisements. He criticised the AEC's investigation saying: "They took too long to take the matter seriously". Mr Brown said he hoped the AFP's investigation would be more thorough.

The Exclusive Brethren, which does not allow its followers to vote, continually has said the advertisements were not part of an organised campaign, but a case of individual members acting on their own free will. However, investigations have shown that many advertisements were either booked or authorised by senior Exclusive Brethren members. An AEC spokesman said in an emailed statement the AEC would not "as a matter of protocol, comment on what methodology it may or may not have employed, or individuals it may have contacted as part of AEC investigations, including that regarding Willmac Enterprises, and the AEC has no comment in response to your inquiry about a Mr Joyce." The spokesman refused to say if the AEC would investigate Mr Joyce's involvement further, or if it would pass on the information to the AFP. By JAI BEDNALL and MICHELLE ETHERIDGE



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