

Politics Story

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Exclusive Brethren allege persecution

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By [Simon Collins](#)

Members of the Exclusive Brethren have accused the Government of "systematic persecution" of their religion since the last election campaign.

Three members of the 7500-strong church yesterday warned an inter-faith forum in Hamilton that other minority religions could be persecuted if they dared to criticise Labour.

A Mangere member, Barry Pinker, said some church members chose to produce anti-Government leaflets in the 2005 election campaign "out of concern for the prosperity of our nation both morally and materially".

In speech notes which he did not deliver in full, he said the church's aim for "a simple and unworldly lifestyle apart from the aspects of the world that allow for moral degradation" had become more important because of laws such as those legalising prostitution and civil unions.

But he said the message of the Brethren election leaflets had never been debated. Instead, "what has followed has been a systematic persecution of the fellowship the campaigners happened to belong to".

He said:

- * Prime Minister Helen Clark referred to the church several times as a "weird cult".
- * Cabinet minister David Parker called it "the Christian version of the Taleban".
- * Labour MP Georgina Beyer asked for its members to be "dragged out of the country".

"These attacks, included in over 330 demeaning comments made under the protection of parliamentary privilege, have been a very hurtful experience, especially to the many of our community who were unconnected to activity in the 2005 election," he said.

"If the leaders of a nation attack and demean a minority, where do they turn? Our fear is that any of the minorities represented here today could be the next."

He said later that the Brethren members who organised the election leaflets paid for them personally.

He and his two colleagues distributed a pamphlet at the forum explaining that the Brethren followed a biblical principle of "separation".

"Separation principally occurs in matters of fellowship and includes social activities such as eating and drinking, membership of societies and entertainment," it says. "Social activities must be shared with those who participate in Holy Communion according to scriptural teaching."

For that reason, members did not vote in elections.

Delegates from other faiths at the forum approached the three Brethren members afterwards to praise their courage in speaking out, even though there was little support for their proposal that Christianity was the basis of the country's religion.

An Orewa Buddhist, Joan Buchanan, told them in the full forum: "When you are disenfranchised and marginalised and the media is misrepresenting your views, I'd like to welcome you to our world. Kia ora."

But a Wellington Jew, Dave Moskovitz, asked: "How do we combat bigotry and intolerance, because that exists in the wider society? How do we deal with intolerance? To what extent do we tolerate intolerant people?"

He said afterwards that it was "highly ironic" the Brethren were complaining about intolerance when they refused to tolerate homosexuals or prostitutes.

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