

Behind Exclusive Brethren lines

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For a supposedly secretive organisation, the Exclusive Brethren church can't seem to shake its controversies. MATT PHILP reports from the Brethren stronghold of Nelson.

There are letters - boxes of them - kept in Nelson MP Nick Smith's electorate offices, that tell of deeply scarred lives. They are from mothers forbidden to speak to their children for 40 years. From siblings separated from brothers and sisters.

The correspondence, by people "shut out" of the Exclusive Brethren church, dates back to the early 1990s, when Smith took up cudgels on behalf of an excluded couple fighting for custody of their children from Brethren grandparents – and reaped a whirlwind.

When the MP publicly questioned the role of the church in the family dispute, it slapped a \$3.2 million defamation suit on him.

"The Exclusives," says Smith, "don't give an inch."

Smith's case drew early, unwelcome attention to the Brethren. These days, the sect with the reputation for secrecy can't get out of the headlines. Maladroit attempts by Brethren businessmen to influence the 2005 election have made the church political dynamite. Now, allegations of historic child sex abuse against an elderly Nelson-based member are prompting fresh scrutiny.

Nowhere more than in Nelson. Other, bigger New Zealand cities have greater numbers and arguably more significance within the church, but the province of sunny hedonism is still Brethren heartland, the place where the church made its start in this country, built businesses, planted a stake.

"Nelson was where James George Deck, the man with the mantle in the early days, was based," says Massey University associate professor of history Peter Lineham, who was raised in an Open Brethren church on the West Coast and who has written a history of the Brethren in New Zealand.

"It has a deeply entrenched Exclusive Brethren culture."

And the smallness of Nelson, Richmond and Motueka makes members highly visible.

At the heart of the Exclusive statement is the belief that the world is defiling, that it is a sin to mix. Nevertheless, it is not unusual to see headscarved Exclusive women pushing heavily laden trolleys down the aisles of Nelson's supermarkets. Brethren businesses are prominent players in certain industries and an Exclusive Brethren college was last year established in Richmond.

Given that visibility, there are worries that the publicity could prompt harassment towards Brethren. The Nelson Mail, in an editorial, has pointed out that there is as yet no evidence the allegations of sexual offending are in any way institutional and has cautioned about the dangers of a witch-hunt.

The policeman in charge, Detective Inspector John Winter, agrees, describing it as no different to any sex-abuse investigation. Says Winter: "We need to take the organisation out of it."

Easier said. Mark Hewetson, a board of trustees member for Westmount Tasman, the Exclusives' new Richmond school, says the climate is "slanted" and "often very unfair" towards the church. He rejects the perception of Exclusive Brethren as isolated.

But the Nelson branch hasn't exactly helped its cause with its history of controversy and a reputation for being particularly hardline – nor, for that matter, its silence. Hewetson spoke briefly to The Press for this story, but a request for an interview with another spokesman for the local church was batted back as a matter for Exclusive Brethren communications in Australia.

Smith, however, says he is inclined to take a more balanced view of his Brethren neighbours today.

During his legal stoush – eventually settled with a joint statement and no payout – he gained a "pretty good knowledge of what takes place in there", he says.

His summation: patriarchal, closed, defensive and historically implacable when it comes to former members.

In his early years as electorate MP he met a lot of "people who had left the church or been forced out with very deep scars. The way they treat ex-members is incredibly harsh and psychologically damaging."

But he sees far fewer of those cases now. He hopes that the appearance of a slight softening is genuine. He was surprised when church leaders approached him years ago apologising for what had occurred in the 1990s.

"They now regularly make delegations to me about issues of foreign policy, moral issues. I've always found their lobbying respectful and polite."

How does he believe the Exclusives are seen locally?

"As law-abiding citizens, as a rule. They are seen in business as people who always pay their bills and are as good as their word. No doubt they are also reasonably good consumers of spirits (alcohol), but having said that, there's no evidence of many problems arising.

"I think when any closed organisation makes noises that they want a greater degree of openness, that that should be welcomed. But we should judge them on their actions, not their words."

In that respect, although a supporter of the principle of greater choice in education, Smith worries about where the recent development of separate schooling might lead.

"It does offer an additional risk of them becoming more isolated and closed. In the past, at least the children of Exclusive Brethren had contact with other parts of the community through their schools."

The other major point of contact is commerce. To drive up Richmond's Gladstone Road is to get a feel for the kind of industry Nelson's Exclusive Brethren have made their own: trucking; a light machinery firm, owned by one of the "name" families from the local church; a bearing and transmission business. Head into Tasman's orchardland, and you find farms owned by Exclusive Brethren, although perhaps not as many as in years past. The change of tack is, in part, a result of an international directive from church leaders in the 1960s for church members in outlying districts to "move into the towns". But Brethren choices in business are also decided by their strictures against higher education. Unlike Mormons, they aren't likely to feature strongly, if at all, in the corporate world.

In some ways, the Exclusives have been successful in business despite their beliefs.

Barcoding is forbidden – "but they tend to get around it by smoke and mirrors," says Peter Lineham. Similarly, they have found ways to accommodate computers, although never the internet – "they believe strongly that the Antichrist is taking over the world and if they are connected in to it they will be judged".

They tend to shun the local Chamber of Commerce and are not players in industry groups.

"But because they're in similar businesses there's often a lot of room for complementary marketing by Brethren businessmen, and supporting one another generally. There is a tremendous amount of internal lending."

Does it amount to a Brethren business bloc?

Former tobacco grower and current mayor of Tasman John Hurley grew up next to a Brethren family in Motueka and has had extensive business dealings with church members over the years.

"I've heard of it, I've never experienced it," he says of the idea of a bloc. "I don't doubt it's the case. But to the extent of dealing only with themselves? No, I'd dispute that."

Hurley ascribes Brethren business success more to "their very close attention to detail and their diligence. All my life I've worked and traded with them and I've noticed that when you buy something from a Brethren firm they back up their product."

Tasman orchardist Vince McCauley bought his land off the Exclusive Brethren after arriving in Nelson from Australia several years ago. He has since used them to supply his earthmoving operation. His perception of the Exclusives is that they are spread "far and wide" in local business. "And in all of the dealings I've had with them, they have been straight down the line."

When his daughter had to undergo open-heart surgery at a critical time of the season, he says, it was the neighbouring Brethren orchardists who stepped up. "They said 'go, we'll sort it, we'll spray or mow or whatever'. They were superb."

The flipside of Brethren unity is less palatable. The shunning of ex-members allegedly extends even to blacklisting their places of work. One former member told The Press that a Richmond supermarket was once ruled off limits merely because an ex-communicated member worked there.

If the Exclusive community is more visible in Nelson than most places, so, too, are the church's rejects and refuseniks. These people make no secret of their bitterness towards a church – more accurately, a church leadership – they blame for wrecking their families. Motueka man Brendon Wood was "kicked out" of the Exclusive Brethren aged 15 – for being too friendly with non-church members, he says. An older brother had already left; another went later. Wood says his father was eventually excommunicated for refusing to quit the timber business as ordered (the issue: the requirement by secular authorities to carry walkie-talkies while on the job).

Wood's mother, three other brothers and a sister cleaved to the church. Even in a small town such as Motueka, they might as well have left the planet.

"It's better with them than it used to be," he concedes. "At least now they say 'giddy' if they see me."

The softer line, which has included an apology to the Woods from church elders, has all come far too late. But at least the family's cartage business is no longer blacklisted.

"Since the reforms came in we've been allowed to buy things off Brethren businesses. They don't deal with us, we only deal with them and we can never work for them, but we can now buy parts."

Wood believes any thaw is the result of a directive from Sydney and the man revered as speaking the mind of God, the Elect Vessel Bruce Hales.

That would make sense, says Peter Lineham. The Exclusives may not believe in formal ordination, he says, "but in the end, everything winds its way to the top".

At the local level, another evicted Nelson member, Doug Field, says his experience of the church is that it was both hierarchical and deeply, relentlessly political.

"It might not have been written down, but everybody knew who was boss and the pecking order was made clear," says Field, who left the church more than a decade ago and has

seen his family shredded just like Wood's. (It was one of Field's seven brothers, Stan, whom Nick Smith championed in the custody dispute.)

The leadership tended to involve the same handful of families.

"They were always the successful businessmen. The people with money were the ones who talked. My dad would sit on the fifth row in church because he was just a lowly chainsaw mechanic.

"As a kid, for the adults in my life, everything was about `what am I going to say? Will it be the right thing? Will I get a pat on the back?'"

Coupled with the hardnosed personalities of its church leadership, Nelson's reputation as the birthplace of the Exclusive Brethren in New Zealand has forged a particularly unforgiving regional character, says Field. "Nelson has a name among Brethren for being extra strict. I remember one school holidays going up to Palmerston North to help on a berry farm and noticing how much more relaxed it was."

He remembers having to ask a Nelson elder for permission to buy a house in a certain area. "You weren't allowed to buy in an area where the local meeting was already too full. Every aspect of your life was monitored, controlled."

But Field says he feels no bitterness towards the local flock, 90 per cent of whom he believes are decent people, if mistaken.

"I was told that the world was completely evil, that it was cold and dark out there and everyone hated everyone. It took me a year after I got kicked out to realise it was absolute bunkum. When I see them now, I feel sorry for them, because I remember what I was like, scuttling around like a four-legged crab. When you are Brethren, being out in public is not a comfortable thing."

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