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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."



MARK CORNELL/The Press

ENCLOSED LIFE: at the heart of the Exclusive Brethren statement is the belief that the world is defiling, that it is a sin to mix.

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