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# Brethren: We are not that different

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The Exclusive Brethren say they are becoming more open, but when spiritual leader Bruce Hales jetted into New Zealand last week, the church went to great lengths to shield him. HELEN MURDOCH spoke to the church's first media frontman, Tony McCorkell.

Reclusive, elusive, secretive or just plain private, the Exclusive Brethren Church remains an enigma.

Dwarfing a Nelson motel couch, the church's media manager, Sydneysider Tony McCorkell, maintains that the church is changing, reviewing its administrative practices and openly engaging with the community.

McCorkell is the inaugural media face of the 40,000-member, 187-year-old group, known for its reclusive separatism, family division and controlling regulation.

In New Zealand the sect helped bring down former National Party leader Don Brash when its funding for a supporting pamphlet drop and budgeted \$1.2 million election campaign became public.

McCorkell said the National Party business was "very unfortunate and the public backlash vilified thousands of innocent church members".

New Zealanders wanting to voice their electoral opinion through a lobby group or pamphlet did not have to state their religious beliefs.

"But we have seen in New Zealand a culture where Exclusive Brethren are not seen as members of the public," he said.

Recent child abuse cases involving Exclusive Brethren members, in Nelson and Australia, have also hit the headlines.

As a result the Exclusive Brethren went to several different church groups, examined their policies, sought legal advice and came up with strategy covering legal and moral obligations, said McCorkell.

"The church abhors child abuse, and there is never any suggestion they have tried to cover it up. But we do think there has been a lack of direction on how to deal with it."

A complaint or confession is now immediately referred to a designated committee which hands it on to police.

"In the past the church has tried to deal with the matter themselves; now the matter is dealt with by the authorities," said McCorkell.

Those accused are banned from attending church, but members can offer pastoral care to them and their families – and where possible, the victims – until the matter is dealt with.

The child-abuse strategy was among a range of administrative changes the church had made in recent years, said McCorkell.

A comprehensive review in 2003-04 also considered how the church dealt with members who had left.

The church could have done better, but it was made up of human beings and "humans do not get everything right", he said.

Former Exclusive Brethren, known as "The Outs", have

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HELEN MURDOCH/The Press

FIRST POINT OF CONTACT: inaugural Exclusive Brethren media spokesman, Tony McCorkell.

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