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Local News

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Brethren: reveal plans to transform local nick into church

IT may not be of biblical proportions, but the Brethren's 10-year search for a new place of worship has certainly been epic.

Members of the Christian group, who believe in keeping themselves separate from the evils of secular society and are based in Redlands Road, first started scouting for a second home in 1993.

They thought they had found an answer at the former Shinfield police station, but the plans have hit a snag.

Their application to convert the station in Hollow Lane into a worship hall has been withdrawn after Wokingham District Council officers indicated there is not enough parking space, no room for cars to turn and elaborate alterations may be needed to the building for disabled access.

One of the Brethren, who asked not to be named, told the Evening Post members had decided that a "cheap option refurbishment" which would allow the group to use the building quickly would not be possible and they are turning instead to their long-term plan to demolish the buildings and build a new purpose-built place of worship.

They hope to submit new plans soon.

The Brethren, also known as The Sarum Hill Trust, which left the established church in the early 19th Century, now has members all over the world, 15,000 of whom are in Britain.

Its church has no hierarchy and operates as a family.

Members preach in the street every day – in Reading opposite the Minister in St Mary's Butts at lunchtimes – and work to address unemployment and poverty.

They are noted for a desire to be "separated from evil" which means they run private schools for their children, live in detached houses, use free-standing business premises and meet in dedicated churches with separate access and car parks.

Female church members dress modestly, have long hair and cover their heads with headscarves in public.

The Brethren member said church members worked and shopped in the community, but kept themselves separate in their private lives, preferring to meet together "with those who are walking with us".

According to documents sent to Wokingham District Council in support of the original application by the trust, the new 'local hall' would be used normally by about 40 people for Holy Communion on Sunday and a prayer meeting on Mondays, neither lasting more than an hour.

Their churches are solely used for worship and religious instruction and not hired out for other activities. They never have instrumental music, youth groups or eating and drinking in their local halls.

Their largest meetings would still be held at their main church in Redlands Road, Central Reading.

The Brethren – who prefer to have a place of worship close to home so they can walk to their prayer meetings – have considered 22 potential sites in Earley, Woodley, Shinfield, Winnersh and Grazeley without success.

The spokesman said the Brethren, who own the freehold of the police station, paid about £250,000 for the site but do not have enough money for the new building yet. He said if they could gain planning permission then raising the funds over the next five years "would probably not be a problem".



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