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The secretive sect, Exclusive Brethren, is planning to extend the number of students at its Agnew School in Gerard Street.

Secretive sect denies influx

17.12.2007
By Susan Searle

PLANS for future expansion at the exclusive Agnew School, in Gerard Street, do not translate to an influx of Exclusive Brethren followers descending upon Toowoomba.

The group, dubbed the most secretive Christian sect, has had a bad reputation in the national spotlight, according to Exclusive Brethren spokesman Tony McCorkell.

"They are very peaceable group of people who mind their own business and keep to themselves and as a general rule they don't attract media attention in everyday lives," he said.

Toowoomba City Council approved the extensions so the school could grow from 20 secondary school students with two teachers to 60, including primary schoolers, next year.

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Ultimately, the applicants Southridge Education Trust expect numbers to rise to 180 students by 2018.

Mr McCorkell goes to great lengths to stress group members aren't that different.

But members of the 200-plus strong Toowoomba congregation weren't that convincing.

The spokespeople were evasive, did not want to be quoted, and opposed to the exclusive school being linked to the church.

The Chronicle's enquiries were directed to Mr McCorkell, the Brisbane-based inaugural media face for the 40,000 member, 187-year-old group.

Secret or media shy, he translates, to private.

"They value their anonymity," he said.

They are cautious about "reflections on the church".

"If you do something in the community, your religion shouldn't be part of that," Mr McCorkell said.

"Brethren do business with non-Brethren, they interact with society like anyone else except they don't share a meal with people they don't share communion with on a Sunday," he said.

The Brethren have a busy social calendar with each other.

Mr McCorkell admits the Brethren are exceptionally protective of their children.

So "morally questionable influences" like television, radio, cinemas and even university campuses are banned.

The Brethren, he says, seek to live simple lives.

And, Mr McCorkell proffers, no windows in the church is a matter of better acoustics.

"It's simply a design feature, nothing sinister."

And there will be no-one from the Bethren running for the Toowoomba Regional Council because they don't hold office.

In fact, most don't vote.

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