

Brethren plans new school in Diamond Valley

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THE controversial Exclusive Brethren church hopes to build a school for about 100 students in the Diamond Valley.

The *DV Leader* understands a location has already been chosen, but the church has declined to reveal where it is.

The Brethren's largest Victorian school, in Glenroy, had outgrown its premises, spokesman Doug Burgess said.

"The Diamond Valley area is under consideration, but no planning application has in fact been lodged," Mr Burgess said.

The church, which has been rapidly expanding in the Diamond Valley in recent years, has been accused of shady political dealings, secrecy and shutting members off from the outside world.

Michael Bachelard, author of *Behind the Exclusive Brethren*, said the church had "elements of cultishness" but had become more relaxed in recent years.

Mr Burgess said the word "cult" was used to stereotype and demean the church. But he said it had none of the characteristics of a cult and many Brethren members ran small businesses that dealt with the general community regularly.

"Like many in the wider community, we are, in our lives, private people who value our faith above all and who believe in the sanctity and importance of the family. This should not be misconstrued as 'secretive'," he said.

"Brethren parents, like parents of other religions, are keen to see their children taught the government-endorsed curriculum in an environment that is consistent with their values."

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Mr Burgess said the church did not "improperly influence" politicians, but simply exercised its right to be vocal on issues.

The Exclusive Brethren had established four prayer halls in the Diamond Valley in recent years and might build more, he said.

"Some members of the church find the area appealing; it's an enjoyable place to live," he said.

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