

CONSERVATIVE BRETHERN CHURCH FACES COMMUNITY OPPOSITION.

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Masterton, May 14 - Members of the ultra-conservative **Exclusive Brethren** church have invested millions of dollars in Masterton since selecting the town as an ideal place to settle, a council hearing has been told.

The insular group reportedly has fewer than 2000 members in New Zealand and 40,000 worldwide, and maintains little contact with outsiders.

The Masterton District Council is currently hearing their bid to establish a church at Solway - a bid which faces fierce opposition from local residents.

Tyler Ross, of Tomlinson and Carruthers Surveyors, said while new to the area, the congregation had brought expertise and resources to establish businesses and "contribute positively to the Masterton community".

Mr Ross is helping members obtain resource consent to relocate a building to Solway Crescent to be used as a church.

The application is in the name of Miles Suckling, who owns land at Solway.

Mr Ross said the sect had researched Masterton before deciding to move there, and been impressed with the community, its facilities and "above all the energy of the township that indicated Masterton was surging forward".

Church members had contributed several million dollars buying property and setting up businesses, he said.

Members were so interested in developing the region, they were encouraging AirNZ Link to do a feasibility study on providing a regional air transport route using Hood Aerodrome.

But several residents of the Solway Crescent area have objected to the plans, fearing an increase in traffic

and noise, especially early on weekend mornings when the church holds 6am Lord's Supper services.

Neighbouring Solstone Winery director Elizabeth Barrett-Hackel's attempts to object to the behaviour of church members were disallowed.

The district planner advised against the application, saying it would set a precedent for churches to be built in residential areas

- forbidden in the district plan.

Mr Ross argued that not all the 50 members would attend the early morning services, and those who did would be mainly on foot.

"The fact is that a high number of churches, and religious assemblies, are located within areas in Masterton zoned residential."

Resident Lawrence Gray estimated an additional 500 cars a month would use the road if the church was allowed there.

"We strongly oppose this church."

Rex Bateman said the planned early morning church gatherings on weekends would be a problem as people could start arriving from as early as 5.30am in a street that is now "deadly quiet".

The committee has reserved its decision, which is likely to be known in about 14 days.

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