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WAIKATO TIMES STORY

Religious sect eyes Cambridge as new hub

30 September 2006
By [BRUCE HOLLOWAY](#)

Cambridge could become a major hub for the secretive Exclusive Brethren religious sect, say some of the town's residents.

At the very least they suspect the Exclusive Brethren -- who sprang to prominence through their \$1 million backing of the National Party and hiring of a private detective to dish up dirt on Labour Party politicians -- are about to become even more exclusive in Cambridge thanks to the construction of a windowless church on Swayne Rd, opposite Cambridge High School.

When they are not trying to manipulate general elections, the Exclusive Brethren maintain minimal interaction with the rest of society, and little is known of their plans for the 1214sq m building which is approaching completion.

But one neighbour, who did not want to be named, said the building's size was a sign that the town could become a "Temple View-style centre" for one of the world's strangest religions.

The "church" looks like a giant packing shed from the outside and will feature an auditorium, foyer, toilets and corridor according to Waipa District Council plans -- but no windows on the main part of the building.

The lack of windows is a tradition which reflects the extent to which the Exclusives -- reputed to number 8000 in New Zealand -- seek to exclude.

The Exclusive Brethren's power play in seeking to influence the outcome of the last general election in National's favour makes them fair game for scrutiny.

But they generally try to keep themselves separate from other people (including other Christians) as much as possible. They believe the world is a place of wickedness and regard "exclusiveness" as the only way to keep away from evil.

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CHURCH HALL: A new Exclusive Brethren church being built in Cambridge.
BRUCE MERCER/Waikato Times



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Church construction was commissioned in the name of the "Cambridge East Gospel Trust".

Valley Sands Ltd proprietor Paul Gordon -- a father of 14 children -- was named as the project contact on site plans, though he initially denied any involvement when approached by the Times.

When it was pointed out his name was on council documents, he said: "I was just helping out."

He confirmed he was an Exclusive Brethren, but would not be drawn on the need for a building of such size -- or why it had no windows.

"No comment, I don't know what we've got there," he said. "It's anybody's guess. I don't want to discuss it any more."

The Brethren presence in Cambridge has drawn mixed feedback.

"They are nice people to work with," said one supplier to the building site, who did not want to be named. "They are polite, pleasant, lovely people.

"But this would have to be the worst case of brainwashing Cambridge has ever seen."

Pastor Norm Silcock of the Open Brethren Raleigh St Christian Centre was at pains to stress there was no link between his church, which has roots in Cambridge dating back to the 1890s, and the Exclusive Brethren.

"It is awkward for us because when we say 'Open Brethren' we feel obliged to differentiate ourselves," he said.

"They have a very hierarchical relationship. Our churches are completely independent of each other."

-- Salesman Peter Etchells is one of three Cambridge East Gospel Trust trustees along with contractor Carl Brewer and nurseryman Patrick Dunn.

Mr Etchells declined to comment on the size, scope or nature of activities at the new church.

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