

East Grinstead Courier

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Cult brands vicar a 'nazi' in new row

A FELBRIDGE clergyman was this week branded "a Nazi" and accused of "religious persecution" after an incident at the Saint Hill Manor headquarters of the Scientologists as the row between cult members and established churches deepened.

The Rev Stephen Bowen, vicar of St John's, says angry cult members ordered him from the grounds and then filmed him and companions accompanying a Zimbabwean Scientologist trying to get his passport back from cult officials.

"I was accompanying the man in case he needed help, but I got very angry treatment," he said. "A Saint Hill official came out to see us and was furious I had come along."

Mr Bowen said the woman was waving a copy of last week's letter to the *Courier* by town clergy denouncing Scientology. "She said that if this was what I felt then I had no right to be there and demanded I leave immediately."

Mr Bowen was one of nine Church of England ministers who signed the letter which warned people to stay away from the both the cult and its Dianetics centre. They said they did not believe that Scientology was "acceptable or beneficial" to society.

With Mr Bowen were Bonnie Woods and her husband Jon Atack, who have just set up the Escape group, which aims to help people wishing to leave the cult.

Mr Bowen said while he was being

asked to leave, the group was being photographed and videotaped. "There were people, who I assume were other Scientologists, taking photos of me and the others. It crossed my mind they were trying to intimidate us, but I just found it very odd."

The drama continued when the Scientologists refused to return the passport and called police claiming that the former student had stolen cash and made unauthorised phone calls.

The man was taken to East Grinstead for questioning but released without charge. His passport was returned by officials at Saint Hill after a police request. Mr Bowen said Scientologists had continued to take photographs even at the police station.

A spokesman for the Church of Scientology said: "Stephen Bowen was asked to leave because the Church is entitled to ask anyone to leave whom it believes to be involved in inciting religious persecution."

"Saint Hill is open to anyone and everyone, but naturally the Church must reserve the right to exclude a particular individual if it wishes to do so. Anyone involved in a Nazi-like hate campaign against religious freedom should not be surprised if they are photographed or videotaped."

As the *Courier* went to press last night (Thursday) Rev Bowen was not available to comment on the spokesman's accusations.