

Christian Outreach in the Jewish Community

by Rev. Kevin Parviz

Most congregations have an evangelism committee--and some are more effective than others. But not all evangelism committees include witnessing to Jewish people. There are many reasons for this, including fear, rejection, or the belief that Jewish people can be saved through their own Jewish faith. But if your congregation is willing to try, I would like to offer some suggestions about how to start reaching out to the Jewish people in your community. These suggestions come from my experience of being brought up in a Jewish home, working with various Jewish evangelism groups since 1991, being a pastor of a Messianic Lutheran congregation, and speaking to many congregations around the country about Jewish evangelism.

When Jesus said in His Great Commission that we should "make disciples of all nations," He meant both Jews and Gentiles. Most of the early church was Jewish, as were Jesus and the apostles, and most of the first witnessing was to Jewish people. Jesus had to make a special effort to instruct the church to also reach out to Gentiles, even adding a 13th apostle (in the person of Saul/Paul) to do it. Today the church often turns it around. We witness to Gentiles and need to be urged to witness to Jewish people.

Jewish people number 6,000,000 in the United States and are one of the most Gospel-resistant ethnic groups in the United States. Most have been taught that they should have nothing to do with this Jesus person and that to become a Christian is a betrayal of their Jewish heritage and their people. Some Jewish believers in Jesus have even experienced complete rejections by their own families when they came to believe that Jesus was their Messiah.

So when you call on a Jewish home, you might not be well received. You could be maligned, rejected, ignored, or in for a big argument. The "victories" may be few. You will be tempted to give this tough ministry up and seek an easier one saying, "Others can do this. I will join the 'cookie corp.'"

But there may be no one else to do it; God may be asking you to do it. And remember that whatever "failures" or "victories" you experience, they are not yours. They are God's. He is the only one who can touch and change people's hearts.

When the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod began active ministry to Jewish people in the '70's (beginning with a resolution put forth by Rev. Bruce Lieske, Founder of Lutherans in Jewish Evangelism), the major Jewish organizations began a campaign of intimidation and resistance. In public media they called such efforts "targeting the Jewish people," and labeled them bigoted, narrow, prejudiced, insensitive, anti-Semitic, and even anti-American. On the local level, the Jewish rabbi, the ministerial alliance, or even neighboring churches may use the same tactics, as the belief in the "two covenant theory" (the belief that Jesus is for the Gentiles and Jewish people are saved by virtue of their relationship with God through Abraham) becomes more and more accepted in mainline Christian churches. But we must remember that the most anti-Semitic thing we can do is to keep the saving message of the Gospel away from the Jewish people. For it is only this message that can bring life, all others are death.

Tips:

Here are some tips on how to begin an intentional outreach to your Jewish community.

- Seek out and gather a group of like-minded, Spirit-motivated people in your congregation who can uplift and encourage each other in this ministry. Develop relationships and share the stories of those whom you know you are praying for, and pray together for everyone's concerns. Remember that there is an adversary, and he is not the rabbi, the anti-missionary, or the Jewish people. Read Ephesians 6:11-18.

- Develop your own testimony. In Revelations 12:11, we read that the accuser is overcome by two things. "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony." The blood of the Lamb has been accomplished, but your testimony is very powerful. Many Jewish people will discount the Scriptures (even the Old Testament, called the Hebrew Scriptures or Tanach) or the church, but they usually will not demean your own story, especially if they are someone that you know. Often, "cradle Lutherans" will tell me that they don't have a testimony, that they were baptized as infants and have grown up in the church. Praise God for this, but you do have a story to tell. How has God provided for you? How has he shown himself to be real? What is it that places a burden on your heart to want to share? Why? Answer these questions and others. Develop a story that is yours and that you can share in three minutes or so. Practice it with each other in your group, so that when you have the opportunity, you will "be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15).

- In order to be sensitive to Jewish people, as Paul was (1 Corinthians 9:19-23), it is necessary to understand some of the history and traditions that shape the mind of the Jewish person today. There are many ways to do this, and there are resources available.

Some churches organize small groups called "Messianic Friendship Groups" to study both the Jewish culture and how to witness to Jewish people using materials developed by Lutherans in Jewish Evangelism (314-645-4456). There is also a Lighthouse Bible Study on "Bible Feasts" available from Concordia Publishing House (314-268-1000). Lutheran Hour Ministries has published devotionals around these themes, called "Ponder the Path" and "Amen, Come Lord Jesus," copies of which are available from Congregation Chai v'Shalom (314-645-4456). And for more training, consider sending one of more of your group to "10 Days in July" and other street evangelism outreaches sponsored by the Apple of His Eye Mission Society (1-888-51APPLE).

- You will naturally begin witnessing to those whom you already know and care for. As you discover ways to share your faith with them, you may want to begin an ongoing Jewish outreach to the community around you. You might consider beginning a branch of Lutherans in Jewish Evangelism (LIJE) in your community. LIJE is committed to assisting congregations and volunteers to develop ongoing Jewish evangelism in every city in North America with a significant Jewish population, and has branches in Michigan, Florida, Missouri and soon in Ohio. Partner with these existing branches or call to discover how a branch can be developed in your community.

Resources:

- www.ChaivShalom.com: Our congregational Web site, which will link you to many resources and other ministries, including those listed above, that will be able to assist you as you begin.

- *Bible Studies on The Feasts of Israel* by David J. Born. Published jointly by LCMS World Mission and Lutherans in Jewish Evangelism, 1994. Available at (314) 645-4456.
- *Witnessing to Jewish People* by Bruce J. Lieske. Published jointly by LCMS World Mission and Lutherans in Jewish Evangelism, 1995. Available at (314) 645-4456.
- *Bible Feasts* by Kevin Parviz. Lifelight Foundations, Concordia Publishing House, 2004. Available through CPH at (314) 268-1000 or at (314) 645-4456.
- *Comfort, Comfort My People* e... A course on Jewish/Christian relations by George Hans Liebenow. Concordia Publishing House, 1991. Currently out-of-print, but available at (314) 645-4456.
- *Ponder the Path* by Kevin Parviz. A Lenten devotional published by Lutheran Hour Ministries, 2000. Currently out-of-print, but available at (314) 645-4456.

Practice:

You have a Jewish friend, with whom you have a social relationship, either through work or through your neighborhood. You have always been friendly with each other, but you have feared sharing your faith with him or her, because you are afraid it will destroy your friendship. There is no easy or single way to share your faith with Jewish people. One way I encourage such relationships is to invite your friend to coffee and offer to study the Scriptures together, but reassure him or her that you are only interested in looking at the Hebrew Scriptures and will make no reference to Jesus. You are looking for their perspective on the Hebrew Scriptures and especially about what Messiah means to them. Usually these kinds of opportunities lead to questions by your friend that will give you permission to share what you believe about certain texts.

As a Christian, understand that the Hebrew Scriptures is something that you have in common with your Jewish friend. They may have different beliefs about it than you do, but at least you can share the texts, and the festivals that arise from the texts with each other.

Take opportunities to send greeting cards to your Jewish friends during the High Holidays or Chanukkah (see *Bible Feasts* above.) Use these opportunities to share a message that is contextually Jewish and Christ centered. After all, Jesus celebrated these feasts also.

Have a Messianic Passover Seder in your home. This is a great time to invite your friends to share the Passover with you. Emphasize that this is a meal that you want to remember as well, but it is your home, so feel comfortable telling "the rest of the story." *Passover Hagaddahs* (a booklet that tells the story) are available at (314) 645-4456.

As you begin to explore how to share the Gospel with your Jewish neighbors, you will be blessed as well as you discover the roots of your own faith!

B'shem Y'shua HaMaschiach, in the name of Jesus the Messiah, thank you.