

# Christian-Backed Youth Centers Vandalized in Israel

✖ Christian-funded youth centers in Acre, a city in northern Israel, were vandalized last week after residents expressed concern that their programs were evangelistic, the *Jerusalem Post* reported.

In a letter to the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews (IFCJ), which funds the centers, Acre Mayor Shimon Lankri said some residents were “suspicious” of the group’s intentions “and distrust the organization,” the *Post* reported.

“In recent months, even as we are in the process of opening an additional youth center, those working on the project have been faced with violent threats, including one with a knife and another person nearly being hit by a car, broken glass and smashed plaques,” the mayor wrote July 14.

“We have established a steering committee to look into this matter for the next three months and to find a way of soothing community relations; until then we will not replace the [IFCJ] signs on the buildings.”

The mayor said the situation had been reported to the police, but did not tell the *Post* whether the vandals were from the city’s ultra-Orthodox Haredi Jewish community, which originally expressed concern over IFCJ’s presence in the city.

IFCJ chairwoman Dvora Ganani-Elad said the incident was the first such protest at one of the organization’s facilities. IFCJ runs similar centers in 60 other localities, she told the newspaper.

Founded by Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, IFCJ says its goal is to promote understanding between Jews and Christians, and to advocate on behalf of Israel. However, some Messianic leaders

say the organization has hampered Christian and Messianic evangelism in Israel, making the recent vandalism even more surprising.

Attacks against Messianic Jews and Christians in Israel have escalated in recent years, culminating with a bomb disguised as a gift package that nearly killed Amiel Ortiz in the northern town of Ariel last year. No arrests have been made yet in that case, which is still under investigation.

“[The violence] is progressing—in Ariel you have attempted murder,” said Howard Bass, pastor of Nachalat Yeshua (“Jesus’ Inheritance”), a Messianic congregation in Beersheba, Israel. In 2005, hundreds of Orthodox Jews led a riot at the congregation, attacking worshipers, damaging property and pushing Bass into the baptismal pool, witnesses said.

Bass and the leaders of Nachalat Yeshua are suing the chief rabbi of Beersheba and Yad L’Achim, the anti-missionary group allegedly responsible for the riot. Bass said, “The outcome of our case could bring more attention to the situation in Ariel and in Arad,” where Orthodox Jews have demonstrated against Messianic Jews and Christians on a regular basis since 2004, many times violently.

A spokesman for Acre told the *Post* that the city would reach out to those who opposed the Christian-financed youth centers. In his letter, Lankri said the three existing facilities have been very effective in reducing crime and rebellious behavior in the last two years.

“It is important for us to find out where the core of the problem is and to deal with it by working to build up trust in the community,” Lankri wrote, according to the *Post* “These centers and our work with the IFCJ are extremely important to us.”