

Israel's Crackdown on Christian Workers

Christian organizations are downsizing in the wake of a government crackdown on visas for foreign volunteers.



[] Several Christian organizations founded to assist Israel are being forced to downsize and revamp their services and some are in danger of closing altogether due to a new enforcement of government policy.

Christian ministries in Israel are bolstered by a foreign volunteer staff that had been allowed to serve for up to five years.

But recently Israel's Ministry of Interior began enforcing a rule requiring volunteers to leave the country after 27 months, a move that cuts some staffs by 50 percent or more as visas come due.

"It is shrinking the key Christian ministries and Christian communities in Israel," said Sharon Sanders, co-founder and director of Christian Friends of Israel (CFI). "We all are feeling the crunch."

As a result of the crackdown, CFI's staff will drop from 50 to about a dozen volunteers and paid staff in the coming months.

The decision to uphold this policy came without warning, and it already has forced many volunteers to leave the country. "It takes two years for people to get to know the country and be able to function in

Israel,” said Rick Ridings, director of Succat Hallel, a 24/7 house of prayer that has already lost key administrative staff.

Sabine Haddad, Interior Ministry spokeswoman, said volunteers can return for another 27-month term but must get their visas in their home countries prior to reentry. The law of entry demands that from now on even first-time volunteers get a visa issued in their own nations before they arrive, a bureaucratic process that could deter new volunteers.

Due to the uncertainty, several volunteers have already decided not to return. “We are [Israel’s] best friends in the world, so why this is happening?” Sanders asked. “We love Israel, but this is not a way to treat your friends.”

The ruling isn’t specifically aimed at Christians, but Yuval Yerushalmi, attorney for some of the Christian organizations, admitted, “All this is definitely making our lives more difficult.”

Certain religious officials have long opposed Christian influence in Israel, accusing the organizations of trying to convert Jews to Christianity. In recent years rabbis have ruled that it is “not kosher” to take money from Christian donors or co-sponsor conferences with them.

The heat has been turned up on Messianic Jews as well. A

reporter for Israel's largest daily newspaper spent two months posing as a Jewish believer in Jesus at two Israeli congregations and published a scathing, eight-page article about what she called the "cult" of Messianic Judaism.

Although the report cast Messianic Judaism in a negative light, the exposure inspired nationwide interest in the small community, comprised of roughly 15,000 Israelis. "We have had a lot of opportunity to share the gospel," said Jacob Damkani, who runs the evangelistic Trumpet of Salvation ministry in Tel Aviv and was targeted in the article. "Now, also, a lot of Israelis who keep silent are being asked about their beliefs by their neighbors."

Damkani is using the publicity to address Israelis who visit his Web site, answering several questions raised in the article.

The report followed a series of events that thrust Messianic Judaism into the spotlight. In March, a bomb sent in a holiday gift package by Orthodox Jews was meant to kill David Ortiz, a Messianic Jew who openly shares the gospel.

Soon after, New Testaments were burned in Or Yehuda in an organized campaign by a city official, and in May religious officials opposed the participation of a Messianic teenage girl in the international Bible quiz.

“The Lord is doing something to raise up Yeshua,” Damkani said.

“These events, one after the other, no one could put it together but God Himself.”

–Nicole Schiavi in Israel