

Messianic Ministry Jews for Jesus Celebrates 30th Anniversary

It doesn't claim large conversion numbers, but the ministry believes it has helped change Jewish attitudes about Christ

As Jews for Jesus celebrates 30 years in Messianic ministry, the head of the evangelistic organization is urging Christians to resist efforts aimed at reducing their evangelistic activity among Jews.

In a recent six-page letter to donors, Jews for Jesus President David Brickner challenged several prominent Christian leaders—including the Rev. Billy Graham—to not cave in to Jewish pressure to downplay their evangelism efforts among Jews. He cited a 1973 statement by Graham in which the evangelist said, “In my evangelistic efforts, I have never felt called to single out the Jews as Jews.”

“That comment is still quoted by Jewish community leaders as proof that Graham does not approve of evangelistic ministry directed to the Jews,” Brickner wrote. Graham declined to comment on Brickner's letter, but the ailing evangelist previously has said: “I preach the gospel to any and all who come to our meetings, whether they be Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, Christians or people of no faith.”

Brickner's letter noted that several ministers—including broadcaster Pat Robertson, pastor Jerry Falwell and American Values President Gary Bauer—support the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, an organization that funds

several pro-Israel efforts but whose president, Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, has long opposed evangelism among Jews.

"If you press [certain evangelicals], they will say, 'We believe everyone needs Jesus to be saved, but we don't want to be offending people,'" Brickner told The Washington Times. "Pastors are nervous about taking the heat."

Jews for Jesus is used to taking heat for urging Jews to embrace Jesus as the Messiah. Last summer a group known as Jews for Judaism shadowed Jews for Jesus missionaries in Toronto to detract from their Behold Your God campaign. The initiative is part of a five-year effort to proclaim the gospel in 66 cities worldwide that have Jewish populations of more than 25,000.

"Their claim that we can become more Jewish by believing in Jesus is like saying you can become more of a vegetarian by eating steak," a Jews for Judaism ad declares.

Despite such hostility, Brickner insists Jews for Jesus has changed the climate of opinion about Jesus in the Jewish community. In the 1960s rabbis could declare that Jews didn't believe in Jesus because they're Jews, Brickner said. Today, he believes a Jew can follow Christ without thinking he's the only person crazy enough to make that decision.

Rabbi Charles Kluge, president of the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America, believes Jews for Jesus' impact has been positive and negative. Though the group has led many Jews to faith in Jesus, "the Jewish community seems to identify Messianic Judaism as Jews for Jesus," Kluge said. "Jews for Jesus is not the representative of Messianic Judaism, though

it is a part of Messianic Judaism.”

Since 1998 Jews for Jesus has recorded approximately 2,250 salvations a year, the majority Gentiles. Brickner attributes that to their ministry style, which relies heavily on street evangelism.

Looking ahead, leaders say they hope to refine their evangelistic strategy and mend fences with former staffers, some of whom are so bitter they started an ex-Jews for Jesus Web site. Many of their complaints of control and authoritarianism are aimed at retired founder Moishe Rosen. In an open letter released last fall, Rosen wrote: “We had a tough job to do and sometimes I fear that I was too tough on some of the staff. For those mistakes, I truly apologize.”

Though some former employees now reject Jesus as Messiah, a former Rosen associate said most have kept their faith.

The Messianic Jewish movement has grown to include about 500 U.S. congregations. Yet not all Messianic Jews support the confrontational evangelism style Jews for Jesus practices, preferring to use Jewish liturgy and symbolism to draw Jews to Christ. Barry Rubin, who left the group in 1980 and now serves as rabbi of the nation’s oldest Messianic congregation, located in Baltimore, believes the “cutting edge of reaching Jewish people” is the Messianic movement’s softer approach.

Charismatic businessman Joe Bell, who leads a Messianic congregation in Bristol, Tenn., credits Jews for Jesus with leading him to Christ and disciplining him. “I think there’s a bashing going on and that Jews for Jesus is being persecuted for righteousness,” Bell said. “The devil hates

Jews—especially when they get saved.”

Ken Walker