

Orthodox Jews Sue Over Messianic Church's Expansion

Orthodox Jewish leaders in Israel are seeking to stop the growth of a Messianic congregation by opposing building permits the congregation needs to expand its facilities. After losing initial court rulings, the leaders have appealed the legal battle to the Israeli Supreme Court to stop construction by the Grace and Truth Christian Congregation near Tel Aviv.

"We're in growing pains, and we need to do something urgently," explained Grace and Truth's pastor, Baruch Maoz.

When his congregation bought property and began building, an Orthodox group known as Yad Le'achim took the church to court on two counts. Known for its radical opposition to Christians' witnessing to Jews, Yad Le'achim lost on both counts. In the ruling, the judge castigated the group for religious persecution of Grace and Truth, Maoz said.

But the Orthodox group hired one of Israel's most controversial lawyers to appeal the ruling to the high court. Maoz said the court should rule on the matter in early 2003.

If Yad Le'achim cannot win the legal battle, they may win by driving legal costs high enough to stop construction of the new facility. Already, Grace and Truth has incurred \$45,000 in legal fees—money that should have gone to the new building, Maoz said.

The court's decision will be an important one, Maoz said,

because it will set a legal precedent on the issue of religious persecution. Maoz believes Jewish law should protect all Israeli citizens from such persecution, whether they are Orthodox Jews or Messianic Jews. Despite the opposition by Yad Le'achim, there is surprisingly little religious persecution in Israel against Christians, said Maoz, a Boston-born immigrant to Israel.

Yad Le'achim opposes Grace and Truth's building project because they see it as a precedent for other evangelical ministries, Maoz said. But he noted that legal efforts to ban evangelism always end in defeat.

"We are not intimidated," the pastor said. "God will assist us. He will see us through our present trials."

Richard Daigle in Tel Aviv, Israel