

‘A Sense of Urgency’ Compels New Ministry to Stand FIRM With Israel

The erosion of support for Israel within the church in recent years—especially among millennials—has not set well with Wayne Hilsden and other pro-Israel leaders.

The co-founder and senior pastor of King of Kings Community Jerusalem—a Messiah-centered, Spirit-empowered disciple-making community that reveals the true face of Jesus to Israel and the nations—Hilsden isn’t mincing words about his view that many leaders in the the evangelical church have failed to pass the torch of truth about Israel to the next generation. Nor is he taking a mandate that he believes God recently gave him to “get Israel back into biblical theology.”

That mandate comes in the form of FIRM (Fellowship of Israel Related Ministries), a ministry Hilsden and many other prominent Messianic Jewish and Jewish ministry-related leaders formed in 2014, according to its mission statement, “to unite a global fellowship of biblically sound believers committed to cultivating Messiah-centered relationships that work to bless the inhabitants of Israel and the worldwide Jewish community.”

FIRM will initially launch its initiative to the world at its Israel Summit at Resurrection Fellowship Church in Loveland, Colorado, on Feb. 4-6.

“All of this really relates to an impression that the Lord gave to me directly to rally the troops worldwide,” said Hilsden, who has pastored at King of Kings Community along with his wife, Ann, for more than 30 years. “It has become apparent that many in the evangelical Christian church are not necessarily on board with Israel and that perspective is becoming a dominant voice in the media. Lies are being told,

and they are especially addressing the younger generation of evangelical Christians.

“A sense of urgency came into my spirit that there is a force, primarily spiritual in nature, that is seeking to destroy the people of Israel. God is calling us to have a special plan for Israel that reaches well into the future and culminating at the time when the Lord returns.”

Hilsden is quick to point out that FIRM was “not created to take the place of existing Israel-oriented ministries,” but to “connect those ministries with one another and to create cooperation and synergy” within this specific community.

One such ministry is Jewish Voice Ministries International. One of the many goals of JVMI is to equip the church by educating believers about the Hebraic roots of Christianity. When Hilsden called Jewish Voice Ministries President Jonathan Bernis to collaborate as a board member of FIRM, Bernis didn’t hesitate.

“Wayne is a trusted friend in Israel, and my willingness to get involved stems from the fact that Jewish Voice Ministries’ objectives are very much aligned with FIRM. One of our biggest challenges in the beginning, I believe, is going to be relationship building. I don’t know that the relationship between the church and the Messianic movement has ever been built correctly, for various reasons. There has been a very negative attitude toward the Messianic community from the church and even political leaders in Israel. They have been very adverse to pushing evangelism. FIRM aims to change that landscape.”

One of the biggest enemies FIRM and other supporters of Israel face is the concept of supersessionism or replacement theology—the notion that essentially teaches that the church has replaced Israel in God’s plan and that the Jews are no longer God’s chosen people. Millennial Nic Lesmeister, 32,

director of the Ezekiel Foundation in Tyler, Texas, and a member of the FIRM advisory board, says it is the heaviest issue the church faces with the younger generation as it pertains to supporting Israel.

“There has been a rise of hybrid forms of replacement theology in recent years,” Lesmeister says. “One of the most popular is something called ‘fulfillment theology,’ which is being taught at many influential universities throughout the United States. It gives Israel some credit for having been chosen by God for redemptive purposes, but it is seen as having been already ‘fulfilled’ with the coming of Christ and the birth of the church. Thus it ends up at the same place as Replacement Theology in that it concludes that God is finished with Israel, with a bit less hostility toward the Jews.

“In buying into these teachers’ theologies, many young people have bought into a false theology on Israel. I’m not sure that many of these young people even realize this because it is masked in graceful theological terms that fall much more palatably on the ear than ‘replacement theology’ does. We must discuss, disagree and correct these erroneous beliefs with humility and grace if we want to see a future generation stand FIRM with Israel.”

The public relations representative who handles the operations and marketing for FIRM, says it's clear why the gap between millennials and Israel has widened in recent years.

“The younger generation has grown up disconnected from Israel because ‘standing with Israel’ has become a political statement rather than a spiritual attitude,” the PR rep said. “There is a lack of proper, biblical teaching on the purpose and the future of Israel in the church today. We’ve been taught that the Old Testament is obsolete, the people of Israel replaced and the saga of redemption has continued in the church.

“But when we read the Bible as one who has been adopted into the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob by the sheer grace of God, we start to share in the rich ancestry of godliness that we’ve become a part of. We see that God’s covenant never fails, His purposes always endure, and He shows mercy even when we don’t deserve it. Instead of arrogance towards Israel, we find humility, because they are truly the root upon which we stand.”

Board member Jonathan Wiggins, lead pastor of the charismatic Resurrection Fellowship Church in Loveland, says he believes many young evangelicals subscribe to replacement theology these days without really knowing what the phrase means. Wiggins says all it takes to rebut replacement theology is biblical literacy, which many in the church, especially millennials, lack.

“I challenge people to read Ezekiel 36 and 37 and Romans 9, 10 and 11 and then make up their own minds,” Wiggins said. “Some people who read the Bible read it through a theology lens and don’t even understand the term. The reformers themselves as a people brought this message, that’s why it’s of the utmost importance to know the Bible and what it really says.”

Hilsden said in the November-December issue of *Ministry Today* that one of the reasons why so many young people have little knowledge or interest in Israel is the fact that they read the Bible on a limited basis or not at all.

The fact that evangelical support for Israel is waning can quite possibly be attributed to another factor: the perception of social justice. Many in the media have portrayed Israel as a bully and have labeled Palestinians as the underdog. Although she believes some “well-meaning supporters of Israel have in the past assumed extreme positions of unqualified political support of the Jewish State to the unintended but very real detriment of Palestinian Christians,” author and FIRM board member Sandra Teplinskly believes the social

justice advocacy has wrongly trumped the personal sharing of the gospel.

“Combined with sharing personal narratives of suffering, this new theology has captured the hearts of many young evangelicals,” Teplinsky said. “Evangelicals are increasingly influenced by the shift in Western secular thought that rejects traditional notions of absolute truth and moral values. As a result, they feel free to interpret Scripture more subjectively and with less time-consuming attention as to how the whole Bible interprets itself. This impacts their view of Israel and tends to predispose them to new forms of replacement theology. The Palestinian narrative of 60 years of victimization—which is typically blamed entirely on Israel but not on Arab Islamic leadership—is more compelling than the Jewish narrative of 3,000 years of victimization.”

All of these elements, including silence for fear of persecution, present major challenges for FIRM going forward. Hilsden says he and the other principals involved in launching the new ministry are keenly aware of the spiritual forces at work against them, as well as other supporters of Israel.

He says, however, that FIRM is being established as a voice of biblical reason in the midst of chaos and confusion. All of it begins with the Israel Summit in Colorado next week, which has seen 1,200 registrants in less than six weeks. Additionally, 500 or more high school students are expected to attend Friday’s events along with 75 to 90 students from Youth With a Mission (YWAM).

“Many are asking the question ‘Why support Israel?’ They have many other questions, and we believe it’s crucial to answer those questions. We intend to do just that. We believe we have a sound, theological case that actually requires the church to stand with the Jewish people.”