

Chai v'Shalom Seeks to Win Jews to Jesus

In a small storefront in Dogtown, a St. Louis neighborhood known for its celebration of the Christian missionary St. Patrick, sits a congregation dedicated to converting Jews.

Congregation Chai v'Shalom is tiny by most standards, with a weekly attendance of 30 to 40 people. But it has the backing of the 2-million-member Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

And its mission fits squarely with the Synod's controversial effort to preach the message that Jesus was the Messiah to Jews, in hopes they will convert to Christianity.

On a recent Sunday morning, a couple dozen people gathered at Congregation Chai v'Shalom, a makeshift space where stars of David, one with a cross in the middle, hang prominently on the walls, alongside what looks like a random collection of paintings.

The vast majority of those who attend Chai v'Shalom are not Jewish, but they are interested in reaching out to Jews. The service itself includes the Shema, a central Jewish prayer and lively singing in Hebrew.

But then a distinctly Christian message is delivered: "If you believe in Jesus Christ and trust in him, he takes your sins away."

To the Rev. Kevin Parviz, of Chai v'Shalom, the contrasts are intentional.

"I wanted to identify what was Lutheran about the service and express that in Jewish ways," said Parviz, 57, who was reared in an observant Jewish family but converted to Christianity more than 20 years ago after marrying a Lutheran.

Some in the Jewish community find this kind of worship service offensive.

Among them is Ruth Guggenheim, executive director of Jews for Judaism, an organization dedicated to preserving Jewish identity. She says melding Jewish and Christian practices can be misleading and confusing to those targeted for conversion.

"It's offensive to have spiritual predators out to get our people," she said.

That kind of criticism doesn't dampen Parviz's enthusiasm.

"The most anti-Semitic thing we can do is withhold the love of Jesus to our Jewish people," Parviz said. "The bottom line for me is, if I truly believe what the Scriptures teach, and I do, then the worst thing I could do for my Jewish parents, my Jewish friends, my Jewish people is say 'Oh just go to hell, and I'll be quiet.'"

The work of Congregation Chai v'Shalom falls under the umbrella of Lutherans in Jewish Evangelism Inc. The organization is one of the Missouri Synod's roughly 300 recognized service organizations, and nonprofits independent of the church. While several denominations have long since quit targeting Jews in particular, the Missouri Synod continues the mission, as does the Southern Baptist Convention.

Lutherans in Jewish Evangelism, established in 1980, is now commonly known as Burning Bush Ministries. In 1996, The Apple of His Eye Mission Society was established, a complementary ministry. Both are based in St. Louis.

The Missouri Synod said it agrees with the ministries' missions.

"Christians do have a calling ... it's about proclaiming the Gospel to all people," said Vicki Biggs, public relations

director for the Synod. "That is part of what we do."

Although there are other messianic congregations in St. Louis, such as the nondenominational Beit Tefilah, only Chai v'Shalom is under The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

Efforts are under way to set up other churches like Chai v'Shalom in places such as Florida, Georgia and Detroit. Parviz said the long-term goal is to have a congregation in every city with a significant Jewish population.

While Chai v'Shalom concentrates on church building, Steve Cohen of the Apple of His Eye Mission Society says he travels to various congregations (about 1,800 so far, most of them members of Missouri Synod) to inspire members to take the message of Jesus Christ to Jews.

Missionaries from Apple of His Eye also reach out directly by handing out religious tracts in cities such as Washington, Cleveland and Chicago.

Cohen, previously a member of Jews for Jesus, one of the more prominent organizations focusing on Jewish conversion to Christianity, says he was shunned by his family when he converted to Christianity after learning that Jesus and his first followers were Jewish.

It's unclear how successful Christian evangelizing efforts among Jews has been, but a study released last year by the Pew Research Center estimated that there are about 1.6 million Christians of Jewish heritage in the U.S.

An additional 100,000 consider themselves both Jewish and Christian, though the majority of Jews polled said a person cannot be Jewish if he or she believes Jesus was the Messiah.

Parviz can see why evangelizing to Jews, a population with a long history of persecution, is controversial.

"The Jews have been hurt at the hands of human beings who

purport to be acting in the name of God," Parviz said.

He said he himself was teased during childhood for being Jewish and nicknamed a "Christ killer."

But Parviz stands by his work.

"I think what we go through right now in this place is far less painful than what we have to look forward to without Christ in the end," he said. "That's the thin line that Jewish missionaries have to walk."

There are, however, some lines Parviz won't cross when evangelizing to Jews, such as preaching to children and handing out tracts in front of a synagogue during High Holy Day services.

But to many in the Jewish community, such as Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz, founder of Jews for Judaism, the problem isn't conversion but the methods used to reach that end.

Kravitz argues that those evangelizing to Jews are missing a major historical development: Christianity spread in earnest during the Roman Empire, mainly among Gentiles.

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