

Outreach to Black Community Becoming Staple in Pro-Israel Advocacy

Black History Month is marked annually in February, but reaching out to the African-American community and other minority populations has become a year-round endeavor for pro-Israel and interfaith-minded organizations.

Over the course of the last year, there have been a rising number of delegations of black Christians, particularly clergy members, making pilgrimages to Israel. These groups are increasingly coming from traditional black churches in America. More than 20 high-ranking ministers from the Church of God in Christ (COGIC)—the largest black Pentecostal denomination and fourth-largest Protestant group in America, with 12,000 member churches—made headlines when they went on the first COGIC-affiliated trip to Israel in August 2015. The tour was led by Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, founder and president of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews (The Fellowship).

“The pastors reminded us that the Jewish people and the State of Israel do not stand alone. Today, we envision a new era in bridge building between the African-American Christian community, Israel and the Jewish people,” Eckstein said at the time.

Pastors from other well-known denominations and groups from the black community that have already visited Israel, or are expected to visit soon, include the Progressive National Baptist Convention, the Global United Fellowship and other historically black congregations.

In a show of solidarity with the Israeli government, a group of prominent black clergy members last year publicly denounced

the decision by the Congressional Black Caucus to boycott Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's address to Congress about the Iranian nuclear threat.

While a political disagreement rather than a racial dispute was at play, over the fact that former House of Representatives speaker John Boehner did not consult President Barack Obama about inviting Netanyahu, the public discourse surrounding the prime minister's speech garnered some racial overtones due to Obama's black identity—particularly given the Black Caucus's collective decision to boycott the speech. At a press conference organized by Star Parker, president of the Center for Urban Renewal and Education think tank, the black clergy members made clear that the Black Caucus does not represent all black Christians and that they stand with Israel.

Other organizations such as Christians United for Israel (CUFI) have been working behind the scenes for at least five years in outreach to the black community. They host programs in black churches focused on motivating black Christians to support Israel and have taken dozens of clergy members on tours to the Holy Land. In fact, CUFI started such efforts with an African-American outreach coordinator, Pastor Michael Stevens of Charlotte, North Carolina, and has since expanded outreach efforts to other minority sectors.

"It has never been CUFI's intention to focus on only one denomination of black Christians," Pastor Dumisani Washington, CUFI's diversity outreach coordinator, told .

"Our African-American members are COGIC, Baptist, Pentecostal, nondenominational and more," said Washington, who is also the director of the Institute for Black Solidarity with Israel. "Our former African-American outreach coordinator, Dr. Michael Stevens, is a member of the COGIC and did a great job bringing CUFI's message to his colleagues. We have sought to continue Dr. Stevens's efforts, while reaching out to all Christians

regardless of affiliation or ethnic background. This is why our diversity outreach team includes African, Asian, Hispanic and [soon] Native American coordinators.”

A 2013 Pew Research Center survey found that 51 percent of black Protestants believe Israel was given to the Jewish people by God, while about 44 percent of black Protestants strongly sympathize with Israel and only 12 percent sympathize with the Palestinians.

This data reveals a picture of the historical foundation that black Christians have had in supporting Israel.

“Black Christians tend to be pro-Israel, if only in the biblical and spiritual sense. In-depth knowledge about modern-day Israel or Middle East politics is not common in the black church,” just like it is not common in most churches, Washington said.

Many point to the Zionist beliefs of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a clearly defined point in history when an influential black minister clarified why black Christians should support Israel, typically quoting King’s speech at the annual convention of the Rabbinical Assembly in 1968—10 days before he was killed.

“Peace for Israel is one thing. Peace for the Arab side of that world is another thing. Peace for Israel means security, and we must stand with all of our might to protect its right to exist, its territorial integrity. I see Israel, and never mind saying it, as one of the great outposts of democracy in the world, and a marvelous example of what can be done, how desert land can almost be transformed into an oasis of brotherhood and democracy. Peace for Israel means security and that security must be a reality,” King said.

Today, it is clear why pro-Israel organizations are inclined to spend millions of dollars reaching out to minority groups such as the black community in an effort to educate them about

the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“Recently, I’ve seen increasing efforts from anti-Israel organizations to court members of minority communities to support the pro-Palestinian narrative,” CUFI’s national campus coordinator, David Walker, told . “These organizations prey on the ignorance [regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict] of the minority communities by offering one side of the story that often showcases Israel dishonestly, and thus in the poorest light.

Supporters of BDS (the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement) try to export the anti-Israel reasoning to minority associations by appropriating the successful struggle against real apartheid in South Africa.”

For the original article, visit .