

## Unity and Diversity in Israel

**David Zadok, Field Director of CWI Israel, HaGefen Publishing**

### **Background**

Life is never just white or black. There are shades of grey in every area of our lives. When it comes to Israel, there are not only shades of grey but the entire spectrum of colour! Life is certainly interesting here. So when we discuss unity and diversity in Israel, the truth is that there is a wide spectrum of levels of both.

The history of the Jewish people and our culture is a challenge but also provides us with opportunity. The Jewish people has had to adopt a survival mentality, an instinct that the Lord has granted us in His goodness. This is expressed in a strong individualism, which inevitably involves an inherent lack of trust in others. Since the State of Israel was established over 60 years ago, our nation has been in a constant state of war and danger of attack from both within and without its borders. As a result of all these factors, unity can be a challenging issue for the church in Israel. We are thankful to the Lord that He has blessed the church in Israel with unity because this is not a given, in light of our history and nature!

The Lord is doing a great and wonderful work in Israel and many encouraging things are happening. The churches in Israel are growing, some more than others. One congregation in central Israel, for instance, has grown from 30 to 90 people in the last two years and has outgrown their meeting place. That is an increase of 200%! How many churches have you encountered in your ministry that has grown so much in such a short time? This is only one example and is not indicative of all congregations in Israel, but nevertheless it is very encouraging to see that the community of believers in Israel is growing continually. Although we do not know for sure how many believers there are in Israel, and estimates range from 7000-15000, I think we can all agree that the church has grown beyond what any one could have predicted two decades or even five years ago. For those of us who cope with the challenges and hardships of living in the land of the Holy One it is a very real blessing to see the hand of God at work among the people of Israel.

From this platform, right now, I extend a challenge to you my brothers and sisters in the Diaspora, to prayerfully consider making Aliya to Israel, or to spend some time here, to help with the work. Many wonderful things are happening, and much is yet before us. Come and join in the action!

### **Education**

The subject of education is near and dear to my heart. Many of us in Israel, myself included, realize that there is a need for Jewish Christian schools. There are only two such schools in Israel on the elementary and middle school levels. Over the past five years the groundwork has been laid for the establishment of new schools. One or two of these ventures are congregation based, others are a cooperation between congregations and organizations. There is still great need for people to stand behind these projects, to help lead the vision to reality. At the present time no one is directing or coordinating the various efforts, and this is a help that would do much to bring things forward.

Regarding higher education there are three seminaries in Israel that offer bachelor and master level degrees. The largest of these is the Israel College of the Bible (ICB) where Jewish, Arab and overseas students study side by side. The ICB offers post-graduate degrees in theology and in counseling. The three seminaries cooperate between themselves on a basic level, but much more can and should be done. The most pressing need is to share resources such as literature and professional personnel, and to hold joint training seminars and conferences for staff and students. By means of these academic institutions the body of Messiah in Israel is training the future leaders of the land, and it is therefore vital to bring about a deeper level of cooperation and greater unity than is being expressed at the present time.

The Israel Education Forum (IEF) was established three years ago with the goal of promoting evangelical education among both Jews and Arabs in Israel. This is the uniqueness of IEF, which contributes to increased communication and unity between Jewish and Arab Christians. The board, on which I am privileged to serve as the chairman of the Discipleship sub-committee, is composed of Jews and Arabs. We are glad to see increased cooperation between the various organizations that have joined the IEF. There is still a long way to go, but the journey ahead is worthwhile.

### **Evangelism**

While there has been improvement in the ministry of evangelism, much more inter-organizational cooperation and unity is necessary. Dan Sered, my dear friend, will be addressing this topic in more detail, so I will not go into specifics. But for now what is important for us to know is that much more needs to be done among the congregations and organizations in this area. LCJE Israel is working to bring the Messianic leaders together at various seminars and by doing so to promote networking between the various ministries and an increased unity of purpose and vision. Being a network has some advantages!

### **National elders and pastors meetings**

For almost two decades the pastors and elders from local congregations have gathered together two or three times a year to study, pray and discuss relevant issues facing the church in Israel. This has been a unifying force in the church, though the board, elected every three years from among congregation leaders, is only mandated to organizing the conferences and determining which topics will be discussed.

In my opinion the conferences have been helpful and encouraging. Over the last year we have tackled delicate, difficult issues such as the doctrine of the divinity of Christ, the place and importance given in the church to Rabbinical teachings and traditions, and a heretical teaching from a Korean pastor that had crept in to some of the Russian speaking churches. Two years ago, at the recommendation of the board, many congregations adopted and signed a brief statement of faith. Regrettably, not all congregations chose to adopt the simple statement. Nevertheless, this was an important step in the promotion of unity among the congregations in Israel, the majority of whom do not belong to any specific denomination.

Two other activities are worth a mention. The first is the existence of two email networks. Via these networks members can exchange information, send invitations to seminars or communicate on important issues. The first network is limited exclusively to recognized pastors and elders, and the second, broader network, is for those

involved in various ministries. These two email networks have done much to further unity and communication among those who are laboring for the kingdom.

The second activity worth a mention is the informal gathering of believers at Pentecost or Festival of the Weeks as it is known in Israel. This has been organized annually for many years by the Israeli Messianic Jewish Alliance, who set up a large area with shade, chairs, a grandstand and toilet facilities, and a separate area for booksellers. Congregations present the "first fruits" of their worship in song and dance, or by sharing a message from the word, praying together and blessing new marriages and babies born since the previous year. Some 1500-2000 people gather together for fellowship, and the chance to see friends from all over the country in an informal setting.

### **Publishing**

The ministries involved in publishing do share an unspoken unity of vision and purpose. The need for published resources whether electronic or in hard copy is far too great, so that there is room for the publication of books on the same subject written from different perspectives or theological persuasions. Each publisher has established their own area of "specialty". Both HaGefen and HaChotam produce materials for children and youth, while HaGefen also publishes biblical commentaries and evangelistic literature. HaGefen provides publication services to other smaller ministries. Maoz Israel publishes a wide range of general books as well as leadership training and discipleship materials. Keren Achva Meshichit publishes in the main for adults, and distributes these free of charge. Their pilot project is the re-publication of Hebrew literature written by the Jewish Christian scholars of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Israel Bible Society produces Bibles and evangelistic literature, much of which is distributed free of charge.

The Christian publishers in Israel do communicate with each other and for the most part there is a sense of unity of purpose. However, more cooperation and communication is necessary in order to maximize wise stewardship of available resources. HaGefen is planning a publishing conference for all those involved in the production of literature, with a professional guest speaker from overseas to address the challenges faced by Christian publishers world-wide.

### **Prayer**

In my opinion the main way in which we really can promote unity among the believers in Israel, is to pray together. Although a few congregations or ministries organize occasional inter-congregational prayer meetings, there is much more that can and should be done.

I think that it is vital for congregations in the same geographical area to gather regularly to pray for their congregations, the needs of the Israeli church and the progress of the Gospel in Israel. These prayer meetings would lead to greater unity of purpose and increased cooperation between the congregations and ministries. So let us pray that the Lord will open the door for more such regional prayer meetings to bring believers from different theological persuasions and cultures together before the throne of grace. Amen.

*David Zadok*  
[David@ha-gefen.org.il](mailto:David@ha-gefen.org.il)