

Leadership training in the Israeli Messianic community
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I have 10 minutes for my presentation; however, if I had 15 seconds, I would say three things: A) in Israel, leadership training does not seem to be needed; B) despite this seeming lack of need, it still exists; C) in my humble opinion, there should be much more leadership training going on.

Let me explain. Leadership training does not seem to be needed in Israel because the majority of adult Israelis consider themselves fit for the position of either defense minister or foreign affairs minister. Some actually see themselves sitting pretty comfortably in both chairs. That covers my first statement.

Regarding the second statement: Thank God that despite this situation, some leadership training still exists; we know that the God of Israel is not only logical, but also paradoxical. And the third statement: The more I studied the subject while preparing to write this paper, the more convinced I became that there is a lot yet to be done in this vital area.

To make sure that my 10 minutes do not become 10 Israeli minutes, I will only give a snap-shot. Also, I will focus on the Messianic Jewish community, leaving the Israeli Arab Christian community beyond the scope of this paper – for the sake of brevity, but also because I am, unfortunately, less familiar with their life. When it comes to my sources of information, they are two: the first is *Facts & Myths About the Messianic Congregations in Israel*, a survey conducted by Kai and Bodil in 1999; the second is my personal conversations with leaders and members of various congregations and organizations.

Okay, so much for the introduction. Now let's look at what is actually going on.

The group that one would naturally want to start with is the existing leaders of congregations and ministries. First of all, what education do they have? According to the survey, "On an average leaders of the Messianic congregations have completed higher education (BA or the equivalent). The area in which they have trained vary greatly" (p. 25). This was written in 1999, but is still true today, I think. To give you an example of this variety, in Jerusalem alone among the pastors and leaders we have a math teacher, a lawyer, a political scientist, an architect, a film maker, a few engineers, and so on. My impression is that the same goes for ministry leaders.

How about theological training? Going back to the survey: "Only few of the Jewish leaders have a formal theological training of more than 3 years; some have a year or more of Bible School, but many have a long period of "on the job training" (p. 25). I know of a number of congregations that have been established since the survey was published, and this picture has not changed much either. Most of the theological training that the overwhelming majority of Israeli leaders have is "on the job."

Next question to the leaders: Are they working on their leadership qualifications today, and if so, how? As interesting as the question is, we need to be realistic about the chances of getting an answer, and should perhaps ask ourselves a simpler one: What is available? Are there any Messianic educational institutions, academic or non-academic; any leadership events or mentorship?

First of all, let me mention two institutions that offer academic programs: ICB and HTI. ICB – Israel College of the Bible in Netanya – was founded in 1990 by Wayne Hilsden, senior pastor of the King of Kings Community Jerusalem, and remains the only Israeli Messianic college. ICB offers BA and MA degrees in Biblical Studies and Counseling, and is accredited with both Asian and European accrediting associations. According to the president, tens of their graduates, possibly even over a hundred, are currently serving the Israeli body of Messiah in various leadership positions.

HTI is Haifa Theological Institute, which was established a couple of years ago. It has a modular program consisting of some 12 courses on both biblical and practical subjects. As of April, 4 pastors and a number of elders are among some 40 students. HTI is specifically targeting Russian-speakers by offering translation or even lectures in the Russian language, while ICB teaches in Hebrew. Currently the college is seeking ways to attract more Russian speakers, who constitute, by some estimates, 50–60% of the total number of Israeli Messianic Jews.

Secondly, there are several ministries that are engaged in leadership training on the national level, but in non-academic ways.

Closest to HTI is probably Caspari Center. We do not have accreditation for local students, yet offer good programs with serious and well-planned content. For 6 years Caspari Center held “Hearts to Serve” courses; by 2009 there were over 70 graduates, the majority of whom are currently serving in leadership positions in local congregations and ministries. Today we continue doing leadership training by offering shorter courses in different cities, working with congregations and their leadership teams. We also offer seminars for Shabbat school teachers with a special focus on the needs of leaders in children’s ministry.

There are also three other organizations that have leadership training as a part of their activities. “Lech Lecha” targets primarily young people who have just finished their Army service, and their main focus is discipleship; however, a number of participants are offered a course in leadership as well. “Netivah” and “Katzir” are youth ministries that hold youth conferences, but also are involved, to different degrees, in training the leaders of congregational youth ministries.

The list of organizations engaged in leadership training would be incomplete without those that sponsor leadership events with foreign speakers. Three main representatives of this group are Chosen People Ministries (CPM), MAOZ Israel, and King of Kings Community Jerusalem. To give some examples of their activities, CPM has regularly been bringing to Israel, in partnership with ICB, people like Walter C. Kaiser and

Michael Brown, as well as less-known names in both theology and leadership training; MAOZ is sponsoring a John Maxwell leadership conference (to be held in May); and King of Kings held a one day seminar with Bill Hybels. Based on the number of people who show up for such events, I get the impression that few Israeli pastors are interested in hearing world-class theologians or pastors of megachurches. (Messianic Jews such as Michael Brown, who has drawn about 20 pastors – not bad by Israeli standards – might be an exception.) Given their theological education and the size of Israeli Messianic congregations, the average being about 60–70 people, that is quite understandable.

And now finally, let's look at what is happening in the congregations as far as leadership training is concerned. I refer to the work done by the top leadership with people who are already in middle leadership positions, as opposed to some type of introductory course which a person is required to take prior to assuming their responsibilities. I know of only one congregation where the pastor systematically taught homiletics to his home group leaders. I hope there are more, but at any rate, I understand that in most cases the pastor simply delegates responsibility, and sometimes also has an orientation meeting with newly installed leaders.

In the majority of congregations leadership training is simply absent either because all the leading is done by the pastor and elders, or because there is leadership maintenance, but no training. Here, if there are other leaders, the pastor meets with them more or less regularly to discuss the working issues, and this is more or less it when it comes to factors contributing to the growth of these people.

There are also congregations where leadership training is present but is given a moderate to low priority. There are several different models of this, from a weekly Bible study in the pastor's home or regular times of sharing, discussion, and prayer, to regular meetings to both encourage the leaders and teach them some leadership principles and skills.

The third group of congregations, where leadership training is highly prioritized, is a small minority; I know of 10 such congregations altogether. What is characteristic here is that these are actually not independent congregations, but two networks, each currently consisting of 5 congregations, of which one is either the “mother” congregation—such as “Tents of Mercy,” led by Eitan Shishkoff (Haifa), that started the other four—or the “hub” of the network, as is the case with “House of Praise,” led by Israel Pochtar. Both networks are charismatic, and either identify themselves as an apostolic work or are closely related to such ministry. Shishkoff has been working in Israel since 1995, while Pochtar established his ministry only 5 years ago and is also considerably younger. Consequently, in the “Tents of Mercy” network, leadership training has not only the usual components such as meetings for equipping and developing leaders, but also mentorship of younger pastors and leaders by more mature ones with an explicitly stated long-term goal of multiplication. The most recent initiative of “Tents of Mercy” is the national leadership conference to be conducted in May.

What are the main challenges of leadership training in our country? As you may have noticed, my favorite number is three:

First of all, it is difficult to find the balance between formal training, be it academic or non-academic, and informal or relational training of the type one sees in the lives of Yeshua and the Twelve or Paul and Timothy, where theology and leadership are not only lectured, but modeled, instilled, and imparted.

Secondly, relational training requires ministries with a vision and the ability to grow people. As a young movement that is still so much in the making, we need more such ministers.

Thirdly, the level of commitment among believers is a challenge. The Israeli pace of life is very hectic; people are busy working, studying, and raising their families, which is an often-stated hindrance to more effective leadership training. However, I sometimes wonder if this is really a reason or merely an excuse. It sounds dangerously familiar, after all: “Sorry, I am newly married and therefore can’t come to the banquet.”

To conclude on a positive note, when I shared my concerns with our staff during morning devotions, someone looked at me with a twinkle in their eye and said, “Yes, but the situation gives you your employment.” Thank you.

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