

# Norwegian involvement in Jewish mission

## Possibilities of cooperation in Europe

By Rolf G. Heitmann

Summer 1868 the first General Secretary of the Norwegian Church Ministry to Israel (Norwegian Israel Mission), Peter L. Haerem, visited several prayer houses and mission societies in Germany. The purpose of this journey was primarily to meet with German partners in Jewish mission and be updated on the situation on the mission field, secondly to deliver financial support to German mission societies.

Haerem is writing an extensive and enthusiastic report to his Board with precise details on how the contributions are distributed and spent. The most exiting part of his report is however related to new information from – for him – a new mission field, the ministry of Rev. Faltin in Kishinev. At a mission conference in Berlin a friend of Rev. Faltin, the commercial traveller Mr. Volkmann, told Haerem about the many Jews who asked for baptism and became believers, how they were expelled from their families and were in need of “the Bread of Life” as well as material support. When Mr. Haerem heard these touching stories, he cried out with joy: “Then we fit together. You have the Jews. We have the money.”

Times and things have changed. In Kishinev, Germany and Norway, and in society as well as in theology and mission. The huge number of mission organizations and societies has declined to a minimum. Even if the standard of living for people in West Europe has developed rapidly, there has not been a parallel growth in support for mission work. It is rather an exception than the rule when NCMI last year had an increase in individual donations of 8% and a total increase in income, included wills, of 13%. (Total: 2,5 mill €)

The theological pluralisation and a more restrictive approach towards traditional mission, understood as evangelism, as well as Israel criticism in the church and society do have impact on people’s involvement and support. It has been said that the Norwegian Israel Mission has two handicaps in our promotion, both related to the name: Israel and mission.

It is also a trend that the traditional member based organizations with a relatively heavy democratic structure and long term commitments today loose the competition with more flexible ad hoc groups and initiatives.

The Jewish people *is*. They are still there and everywhere. What do we have? What is our contribution in Jewish Mission today?

### 1. Money or manpower?

Mission is not money. It is primarily message, and therefore also manpower:

*How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?(Rom.10:14)*

Mission is crossing cultural, ethnical and geographical borders with a message by people who preach and serve. NCMI has therefore always not only been a mission organization, but a missionary society. Today we have 3 couples as long term missionaries working in Israel.

These missionaries are working with administration, evangelism and congregational work (Beit Eliahu/Haifa and Immanuel Church/Tel Aviv), education and research (Caspari center/Jerusalem) and counselling (Machaseh/Jerusalem) Volunteers on short term are frequently sent to institutions and congregations. In additions we hire and support local workers in Israel and other countries.

In our strategic plans for 2010-2020, which we now are developing, we discuss the balance and assign the parts of responsibility and tasks between local staff and expatriates.

## **2. Front line mission or supply unit? Partnership in mission**

Last November NCMI celebrated its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary in Israel. Rev. Magne Solheim arrived on the shore of Tel Aviv according to himself “alone and lonely”. Against all advices he decided to leave for Israel after serving for several years as missionary in Romania. Even if he was *The* missionary, founder, developer and entrepreneur, he did search for partners in order to achieve his goals and see the visions become reality. When we gathered in Tel Aviv for an anniversary event last November, we experienced how much Solheim, his co-workers and NCMI has been involved in a multiple variety of projects and important developments in Israel:

- The leadership of the Bible Society in Israel, including the translation of the whole Bible into Hebrew and the New Testament into modern Hebrew.
- The founding of the United Christian Council in Israel, later Israel Messianic Alliance
- The erection of Ebenezer old citizen home for Believers and holocaust survivors

We do believe being in front line approaching the Jewish people with the Gospel. As a mission we should never forget our primary task to share the Gospel. However, the development with a growing and stronger local Church of Messianic believers, forces us to re-define our strategy and involvement. We have to accept that we, as an expatriate organization should not take the lead anymore in the mission, but supplement and support the local believers.

Almost all our ministry in Israel today is related to partnership, either with local congregations or institutions, or together with other mission organizations. Both Ebenezer Home and Caspari center are institutions that were established by joint efforts and commitments among several international partners, many of you present at this conference. Still there is a need for international partnership in mission in order to run and develop these institutions. At the same time we do want to see local congregations and partners stronger involved.

I am grateful to announce that an important step has been taken this last year to indigenize Ebenezer Home. It has been unanimously resolved to transfer responsibility and authority for the running of the Home from an International Board of representatives to a re-structured local registered foundation (amuta).

Also the ministry at Immanuel Church is today organized and structured as a joint ministry among 5 Nordic Lutheran organizations. We believe and have experienced that we by joining forces and resources are able to set and achieve new goals. Some has named Immanuel Church as the most important pulpit in Israel today because of the church’s broad contact with the Israeli population through concerts and “open church”/visitors. We are happy that we

were able to restore the tower of the church recently for a sum of almost 300.000 € without closing down any activity.

The Beit Eliahu congregation in Haifa, founded by the NCMI, is today an independent congregation. We are still the main contributor to the congregation in partnership with the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church of Norway (ELFCN). By the end of 2009 we re-negotiated a partnership agreement which clearly indicate the mutual responsibilities.

Together with ELFCN and other international partners we are also supporting the Bible Society in Israel.

The youth movements within these two organizations have in partnership with Caspari centre, the Palestinian Bible Society and the reconciliation organization Musalaha developed a new concept called Bridgebuilders (BB). BB is a peace and reconciliation project for young Israelis, Palestinians and Norwegians, gathering both in Norway and the Middle East.

Through teams of younger people and volunteers we have also taken part in evangelistic outreach in Israel. The organizers have been local organizations or networks. Such initiatives are important from two perspectives. The Gospel are presented to Israelis and others by enthusiastic and credible young believer. On the other hand this is good training and valuable experience for young people growing in faith and preparing for ministry.

Our last involvement in Israel is a diaconal project through Machaseh foundation. Machaseh is a competence centre for Messianic congregations and counselling centre for people in crises. Machaseh is especially dealing with family issues related to violence, abuse, alcoholism and drug addicts, but also homeless people and people in financial difficulties

### **3. Back to Jerusalem – back to Europe**

The vision of NCMI is to return the Gospel to the Jewish people. Even if our primary focus over the last decades has been the Jews in the state of Israel, we want to be part of a worldwide Jewish ministry, Therefore we have never forgotten our “first love”, Eastern Europe. During the communist period we produced and broadcasted radio programmes in Hungarian and Romanian languages through Trans World radio, Monte Carlo – a radio station planned by the Nazis for their propaganda. Through mails and personal visits we kept in contact with many listeners beyond closed borders.

During the last years we have intensified our ministry in Europe through various partnerships. 20 years ago we started up with lectures and seminars for Lutheran pastors in Hungary. This led to the establishment of Gisle Johnson Institute, named after the Norwegian missionary working in Romania and Hungary 1902-1946. Through pastoral training, lectures and church visits we want to awaken the Church to their responsibility for the Jewish people, including responsibility to share the Gospel with their Jewish neighbours, teach the Church about the Jewish roots of Christian faith and prevent anti-Semitism. The leader of this ministry, Rev. Geza Endreffy, is frequently networking with other organizations, groups and individuals involved in Jewish Ministry.

Some years ago we were supportive to the establishing of a new messianic congregation in Bucuresti. It started up as a diaconal work by some believers who visited elderly in their homes and assisted them in several ways. Today the congregation is led by Florin Suci. Even

if the financial support is to a minimum, we are grateful for the friendship agreement and that we might support through intersession.

A couple of years ago a Norwegian staff member of Jews for Jesus in Ukraine approached me in my office. Arne Tafjord wanted a closer relationship with our organization. We had looked into options for a stronger involvement in FSU, and we believe this visit was an answer to our prayers. We are grateful for this cooperation and for the results of the JfJ-teams in Ukraine and Russia.

Our sister organization in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, Apple of His Eye, Moscow branch, led by Rev. Alexey Shepelev, has for the last years invited us into partnership by contributing at conferences and support production of literature. We are happy that our theological declaration, or statement, is translated into Russian as well as Hungarian. Last year the book Messianic Midrash by dr. Risto Santala was translated and published.

We are grateful that we this spring could enter into a new project by supporting the production of programmes for the new established online radio [www.mashiah.info](http://www.mashiah.info), and through this reach the whole Russian-speaking world with the Gospel.

There is a need for stronger focus on Jewish mission in Europe, both in East and West. The Russian speaking Jewish population in Germany and the huge number of mixed Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews in France should lead to closer cooperation and common strategy among the European mission organizations involved in Jewish evangelism. This is a challenge to my own organization as well as all of us.

#### **4. Dialogue or proclamation**

In the Ecumenical movement there has been a long debate about dialogue versus mission. If the aim of dialogue is to come to an agreement on the least common multiple and accept each other's faith, we do not believe in dialogue. But if dialogue means to respect, learn, prevent prejudices and at the same time keep our own integrity and conviction, we believe dialogue is an important tool in mission.

NCMI is therefore involved in dialogue with Christian churches as well as in practical cooperation with the Jewish community. In Norway we are member of the Council for Cooperation between the Church and Mission organizations with the aim to shape missional congregations. NCMI is also member of the Lutheran European Commission for the Church and the Jewish people (LEKKJ). Annual conferences are focusing on common issues. Two years ago the commission gathered in Oslo on the main issue of Messianic Jews.

In Norway we also have close contact with the Jewish community and leadership of the synagogue through humanitarian help to new immigrants in Israel and through various committees and events. There is only a handful Jewish Believers (Messianic Jews) in Norway, and NCMI representatives are networking with them. Some, but not all of them, are directly involved in our mission.