

Some Flashlights from Germany: Jewish Outreach

Possibilities of cooperation in Europe

By Vladimir Pikman

Historic Flashlight

Before touching on the current situation of the Jewish outreach in Germany, I must remind you of some recent history essential to understanding Germany in this specific regard. Since 1991, the Jewish community in Germany has been the fastest growing Jewish community in all of Jewish history (in terms of percentages), and since 1994, the number of the Jewish believers in Yeshua (Jesus) in Germany has been growing faster than anywhere else (percentage-wise). All this is due to the massive Jewish immigration of the Jews from the former Soviet Union often termed “Russian Jews.”

Since 1991, the Jewish population in Germany grew from a maximum of 30,000 to at least 300,000. At the same time, the number of identified Jewish believers in Yeshua grew from a maximum of 100 in 1994 to at least 5,000 today. Whereas there were no messianic congregations in Germany as of the beginning of 1994, today we have more than 40 messianic congregations and groups in Germany, established just over the past few years.

Overview Flashlights

Organizations and Individuals

The organizations involved in the Jewish outreach in Germany encompass Beit Sar Shalom (BSS), Evangeliumsdienst für Israel (EDI), Jews for Jesus and AmZI. In addition, there are a growing number of churches and individuals who making attempts to share the gospel with the Jewish people and trying to integrate them either in a church or in a Messianic congregation. We can also see new independent Messianic congregations emerging.

My intention in giving these flashlights is not to include the reports of different organizations or individuals. I am attempting simply to provide a more overall picture, not to offend any of these organizations or individuals by leaving something important out. I can assure you that they all do the best they can to bring the Jewish people in Germany to Yeshua, and you can visit their websites or ask them directly for more information. If you need more information as to how to find or contact them, please feel free to ask me (office@beitsarshalom.org).

Signs of the New Awakening

Although we have seen clear evidence of decline in the revival among the “Russian” Jews in Germany since the beginning of this century, we have seen signs of the new awakening in the country in the past two years: more Jewish people are being saved and new Messianic congregations are emerging, enjoying very significant growth right after being started (e.g. Nuremberg, Osnabruck).

“Russian” Specific

The majority of the Jewish people and the majority of the Jewish believers in Yeshua in Germany originally came from the FSU. Most of them speak Russian (many as their first language) and it is complicated, and in some cases impossible, for the older generation to communicate in good German. The difference between the cultures and the traditional German hostility to all those in their midst who are foreign both contribute to a certain “ghetto”-like situation for the “Russian” Jews. The gap between Germans and the Jewish

immigrants is still very big and will probably not be overcome fully within the first generation.

Since more than 80% of the Jews in Germany belong to this “Russian” group, it would be accurate to call the major Jewish outreach in Germany “Russian Jewish outreach.” Due to the circumstances described above, this outreach is most naturally done by believers who also come from FSU and can approach the Russian Jews naturally. It is not surprising that almost all messianic congregations in Germany are planted by “Russians” and have Russian as their main language. We can, however, see some exceptions. For example, the congregation and outreach in Osnabruck was founded by a German couple, who enjoy much respect and many contacts with the Russian-speaking Jews due to their evident love for these people.

There are also some attempts to bridge the gap between “Russians” and “Germans” within the Messianic movement and within Jewish outreach. One example of this is the Messianic congregation in Berlin, which is equally bilingual and has in its midst Jews and Gentiles from about 15 different countries worshipping the Messiah.

Some Specific Flashlights

Outreach to Israelis

Germany has become very popular among Israelis as a country to visit and even as an immigration destination. In every large and significant city, especially in Berlin, it is always possible to find people who speak Hebrew. Unfortunately, very little has been done to specifically reach out to this group.

Outreach to German Jews

While some prominent German Jews are very visible within society, it has become evident that most of them traditionally do not identify themselves as Jews. Many of them are assimilated. And many of them are relatively wealthy and belong to the upper echelons of society. Hence, this is a very difficult group to reach, especially by evangelists with a “background of immigration,” who are far from belonging to the levels of society in which such Jews move. The best way to approach them is through their Christian friends, who belong to the same group within the society.

Religious Jews

The situation with the outreach to the religious Jews is similar to that in other countries. The religious community, however, is relatively small in comparison to the huge number of “liberal” Jews in the country, largely dominated in number by “Russian” and Israeli Jews. There is probably not much need for a specific outreach to orthodox Jews because their number is relatively small, though some individual attempts are being made.

Theological Education

The situation in regards to theological education within the messianic movement and Jewish outreach in Germany has remained unchanged for years – there is an exceedingly small number of leaders and ministers with any kind of formal education. For various reasons, the existing schools do not correspond to the existing needs of the messianic movement. It seems to be an imperative to have an appropriate formal seminary-level school for ministers among the Jews. Beit Sar Shalom has prepared everything necessary to start such school (BJMTA), and we are currently searching for an academic dean who is able and qualified to launch this school.

Bible Education

We are still feeling a lack of educational courses and materials for new Jewish believers in German and Russian languages. This is a need that clearly has not yet been met. Several messianic congregations have recently started using the recorded classes from Haifa Theological Institute that are designed to provide messianic lay-leaders with some systematic teaching. However, they do not meet the need for materials targeted toward new believers and for more systematic supervised training for lay-leaders.

Youth Ministry

The youth ministry in Germany is usually done on a congregational basis. Some of the stronger congregations have youth groups and fellowships. An average of 3 or 4 youth camps are organized in Germany every year. Sometimes, even young people from other countries are invited to such camps. The camps are primarily supported by BSS and EDI.

Between the end of December 2009 and the beginning of January 2010, “Muchan” – the first international conference of young adults – took place in Berlin. More than 100 young representatives from the worldwide messianic movement came to Berlin for this event. The second such conference is in planning and will probably take place in Paris in 2012.

The first German Messianic Youth Conference is scheduled for September 2010 in Berlin.

Children’s Ministry

Children’s ministry is also done on a congregational basis. Almost all existing messianic congregations have a children’s ministry. About two messianic children’s camps are currently taking place in Germany. Beit Sar Shalom in Israel has developed a system of bringing children from Israel to messianic camps organized in Germany.

Rehabilitation Ministry

It is no secret that a large portion of Jewish youth are involved in drugs and that some are becoming addicted. The Christian rehabilitation ministry among Russian youth in Germany has proved to be an effective tool in fighting drug-addiction. It seems that the time has come to start messianic rehabilitation centers targeting Jewish drug addicts. The first such center has been founded in the Dusseldorf area, and there are a few others in planning (some of them in partnership with Israelis).

Street Evangelism

Street evangelism in Germany is effectively done by Jews for Jesus, who are undertaking these efforts in different cities and linking new Jewish contacts with the messianic congregations or churches there.

Some local messianic congregations are also involved in this type of outreach, either undertaking it themselves or encouraging their members to participate in the street outreaches of other organizations.

This type of evangelism works differently in Germany than in some other counties due to the absence of clearly defined Jewish neighborhoods and locations with heavy concentrations of Jewish people.

Contacts with Christians and Churches

In addition to the normal routine of raising support that is undertaken by missionary organizations, there are a number of the messianic congregations and groups trying to build bridges to Christian organizations in Germany. The Messianic movement in Germany is probably more open to contacts with Christians than is the case in many other countries. However, many churches and Christian organizations are still refusing official contact with Jewish believers due to historic post-Holocaust sensitivity toward the general Jewish

community. And still, we were able to see some significant progress in this area in the past few years.

Conferences

We have a very good tradition of holding German messianic conferences for Russian-speaking believers. These conferences used to take place annually, but now they are being held every two years. They provide an excellent possibility for believers from around the country to come together for encouragement and fellowship. The conferences are independent and attract Jewish believers from various congregations and churches.

Unity

The messianic movement and Jewish outreach in Germany enjoy a unity that may seem unbelievable in some other countries. Although we have several small groups and congregations that are keeping themselves isolated, most of us are very close-knit, even without creating any formal joint structure.

Possibilities for Cooperation with Other European Countries and Israel

How We Can Help

In Germany, we have some very capable, gifted and experienced Russian-speaking leaders in the messianic movement and in Jewish outreach. They have experience and a willingness to help in worldwide Jewish outreach. I think that the proper use of these resources could tremendously complement outreach in Europe and Israel.

Where We Need Help

In hearing or reading my report, you can see for yourself the different ministries operating in Germany and the needs we have. The help of other ministers and organizations would be appreciated in all these areas. There are probably also some other new outreaches that could be initiated as well. Hence, there are a huge number of opportunities open to you to complement the ministry in Germany. At the 2007 LCJE Conference in Hungary, while reporting on the ministry in Germany, I made a call for other ministries and ministers to help in this country. As far as I know, for whatever reason, the response to this call was very small. Well, I would at least exhort those who read this report to pray to see whether you are being called to play a role in the Jewish outreach in Germany and, if you are, in what area.