

Jewish evangelism in South Africa: Changing strategies for the 21st Century:

Current strategies and future challenges.

The FIFA™, 2010 World Cup Soccer, spectacular which was hosted in South Africa from June 11 - July 11 was an event that was not only much anticipated but really out did local and overseas expectations. This was the largest sporting event to date to be held on African soil. What started off as only a wish and then a dream for many South African's to be the host country of such a premier sporting event, for the first time not only in South Africa, but for the continent of Africa, became suddenly, after years of talk and preparation (and a few strikes holding the refurbishment and construction of the stadia up!) a dramatic reality. Our first democratically elected president, Nelson Mandela was instrumental in securing South Africa's bid to host the soccer. Despite much negativity about the ability of South Africa to be ready and to have the capacity to host such an event, by and large the experience of locals and the many overseas visitors was a very positive one. The larger host cities such as Johannesburg and Pretoria, Cape Town and Durban, had no problem organising the filling and then orderly and rapid emptying and transportation of the 60 000-80 000 fans from the relevant stadia. Security was very tight, with the writer of this article never having seen so many policemen and women on duty, very visible and controlling the crowds and any potential troublemakers very well.

The question to ask in the light of the topic of Jewish Evangelism, current strategies and future challenges, is what has the Soccer World Cup got to do with them?

I will be using our experience of evangelism around this major sporting event as a take off point to examine and analyse these very issues.

I will be looking at the analogy of the game of soccer, the evangelism team, and the people who made up the “fans” in this regard.

Firstly our team.

Our strategy for the South African context was to have a small, very mobile, well trained team that could effectively be moved from place to place as the different games unfolded in different venues, and then be deployed to the different geographic sites.

This took our team to at least 6 different cities spread out over 3 of our provinces, for the month long period of the Campaign.

In terms of “geography”, now meaning countries where our team hailed from respectively, our team consisted of a one couple from the United Kingdom, one couple from the USA, one Israeli, two other Americans and one South African (myself), making a total of eight. Five of the team are on staff of Jews for Jesus while the other three were volunteers. It also helped that at least half of the team understood what soccer was about and were devoted fans too!

Gender distribution of the team was 5 males and 3 females, with the youngest member of the team was 30 and the eldest was 65.

All team members could speak English (various dialects of it), and we had over 50% who could hold a conversation around the gospel in Hebrew.

Analysis of Jewish identity of the team: All team members identified with being Jewish. For some this identity came only later in their lives as they discovered their lineage, but for others they were enculturated from childhood.

All members of the team were married, with the following distribution of six couples : 2 x JBJB and 4 x JBGB (JB=Jewish believer in Jesus, GB= Gentile believer in Jesus). What this means is that two of the six couples consisted of a Jewish-Jewish couple and four of the couples were intermarried- a Jewish-Gentile couple. $\frac{2}{3}$ then were of an intermarried relationship.

The constitution of the team reveals and highlights one of the trends in Jewish culture worldwide, as well as in our ministry amongst our staff and volunteers, the increasing occurrence and phenomenon of Jewish-Gentile marriages and an increasing intermarriage rate. A comparison of the intermarriage rates are as follows: (*put in intermarriage rates for US, Israel, SA*)

The increasing Jewish-Gentile couples rate in the world and in South Africa is a current trend and future challenge and opportunity for evangelism and the gospel. I will examine this in greater detail later in this paper as I believe that this should be one of the major foci of our resources in the 21st Century.

The second major trend which I will mention now, but only, briefly touch on, is that of an increasing rise of orthodoxy and a return to Judaism in South Africa- mostly inspired by the Chabad movement. This too presents a great challenge to evangelism and strategies for reaching this group which by definition tend to follow a "laager" or ghetto approach and so

wall and insulate themselves off from the outside world and influences as far as they can, which includes the gospel.

The “Fans”

Over thirty two nations were represented by the soccer teams that qualified for the 2010 Soccer World Cup™. There were fans that came from many more nations to our shores. The bulk of the soccer visitors were American and British, followed by South America, Europe and the Far East. Noticeable also were many Israeli visitors to our shores who had come for the event. The bulk of the Jewish people that we came across in the campaign were made up of local South African Jews followed by Israeli's then by Jewish folk from the USA, and South America. While the majority of the “fans” were not Jewish, many of our fruitful conversations and interactions were with Jewish people both from within the land of Israel and from without. At the time we were reminded of the following scripture from Micah 5:7 “The remnant of Jacob will be among many peoples like dew from the LORD.” and this was very true for the composition of the “fans” that we were engaging.

The “coach” and “game plan”-the field.

The book of John Chapters 3 and 4 highlight in a sense the game plan or the current two-fold strategy that we employ in our strategies for witnessing: Let me elaborate: In John chapter three we see Jesus encounter a “*vrum*” Jewish man, Nicodemus. Nicodemus is the one who seeks Jesus out, coming to him at night. This speaks of those who hear about the work that we are doing and are curious to know more. Maybe they received a tract, or saw us holding up a banner on a busy street, or heard us on the radio, television or the web. They may be scared of reprisals or rejection so they come to us in a private place

away from the public eye to find out more. This is the one side of our strategy- that we are available for those whom the Holy Spirit is awakening and we are there to provide them with the truth of the gospel in season or out of season. This allows for that vital “one-on-one” in private interactions where truth can be shared and explored and a vital discipleship relationship set up in which the gospel seed can grow.

The second model that I would describe is the “going out” model to seek those who are lost. This is a picture of the Samaritan woman at the well whom Jesus sought out and engaged to get her curious about who He really is and what He has to offer. This would describe in a manner our direct evangelism approach- to go out and sow much gospel seed to thus discover the people who are at the well so as to speak and offer them the water of life that is found in the message of the gospel. It is through the direct evangelism approach that many “Nicodemuses” will first become aware of the gospel and Jews who believe in Jesus as Messiah.

There are then those who come to us and seek us out and then, there are those we seek out as we in turn go out to sow much gospel seed and raise the awareness and image of Jesus in the public eye.

The ball

As part of this strategy we realise that the gospel is the “good news” of what God has graciously done for the world. The gospel is either good news of salvation for all or “not at all”. We also realise that the proclamation of the gospel and being witnesses to Jesus is His strategy and His command, salvation being His plan for humanity, Jew and Gentile.

Jesus said that we are to be His witnesses, in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. South Africa especially seems like an end of the earth place to me.

To use a very rough analogy here, the gospel is our “soccer ball” in a sense, and we need to get others onto the field and “pass” them this ball which our coach- Jesus- has trained us skillfully in using. They in turn need to become acquainted with this ball and learn to play the game with it, so we can to the goal - salvation of souls.

The rest of team

Evangelism is a “team” effort. Each member of the team needs to know their position and be able to play the ball properly according to their position. They are not to “hog” the ball and keep it to themselves, but must be able to effectively pass it onto their team mates. The team needs to be on the field playing and not in the stands spectating! We need to be able to encourage and equip others to do this very thing, moving from being spectators of the game to active players!

The rest of the team consisted directly of the support staff who helped us with the “behind the scenes” activities so that the direct evangelism could take place. This included the washing and cleaning and feeding and preparing that needed to be happening. Also included in this team were those who were praying for us on a regular basis for the work to be a success.

On a more indirect level, when talking about the “rest of the team” on a broader level we look at the greater Body of Messiah and their partnership and companionship in the gospel. Here we look at the importance of regular contact with the broad spectrum of

denominations and securing speaking engagements in the pulpit to keep the issue of our Jewish people and the need to share the gospel with them alive. This is also an opportunity for raising friends for the task of Jewish evangelism as well as providing opportunities for volunteers to be raised up to come serve alongside us. A church setting also exposes those who are Jewish in the congregation to our ministry as well as those who have Jewish friends to have a point of contact with us to help with them reaching out in turn to them. If there are Jewish-Gentile couples in the congregation then this too provides a point of contact and resources for them for consideration. We need to keep on making ourselves available as a resource to our local churches as they in turn are to us. This is a most valuable partnership and something that we keep needing to cultivate and cherish.

Donald K Smith proposes that “communication is involvement.” What this means for the gospel is that if we want to communicate it effectively we need to get involved in the lives of the people we are trying to reach. We need to learn to speak their language and we need in essence to learn to relate to how they see the world, so that we can communicate the gospel to them. When it came to the soccer, we wrote a number of soccer tracts to try engage with the “fans” at the level they were at as a starting point to open the conversation up to more spiritual things. When it comes to relating to our Jewish people in their diversity, we need to be able to understand their world so that we can better relate. We need to be actively involved in the lives of the people God brings into our paths to minister to and not just see them as spiritual scalps to be hunted.

The challenge of ministry to Jewish-Gentile couples

The joining together of a man and a woman is probably the most cross-cultural event that can happen to any two people. We have heard it said that men are from Mars and Women are from Venus! Throw into this mix the added diversity of the culture of Jew and Gentile, and what started out as “live happily ever after” can end up with a recipe for much disharmony and disunity on many levels. The issues of culture and cross-cultural difficulties are really highlighted here- between men and women and Jew and Gentile.

A very useful model in helping us grapple with issues of culture and how that impacts our ability to communicate the gospel is demonstrated by Donald K Smith’s “Onion” ring model of culture and the individual and community.¹ I also call this the Shrek™ Model of culture- as to quote Shrek- “ogres are like onions- they have layers”². In a similar fashion culture can be seen as an onion with many layers. There are superficial and then the deeper layers. Only the superficial are seen, but underneath them are deeper and deeper layers, until you get to the very core of the onion- hidden, deep buried away but yet the most powerful motivator of the person and community - the often unspoken but heartfelt issues which define a culture- often held on a very subconscious but powerfully emotional level- the issues that define us and are the ones which we will usually die for.

The core then is the area of the person or culture that is hardest to change and the most resistant to the introduction of new things. The core in essence will resist change to the greatest degree. As we move out from the core to the more superficial rings of the “onion”, areas of experience, social authority and behaviour, these areas become more easily understandable and more conscious and more readily accessible and challenge to these areas usually is perceived as less threatening. By using this model in the context of

¹Donald K. Smith *Creating understanding*, Zondervan Publishing house, 1992.

²Shrek™, copyright Dreamworks Pictures, 2001.

Jewish-Gentile couples we can then train ourselves to be cross-cultural communicators, bridge builders and facilitators in this emerging trend and challenge we need to meet.

Wan and Zaretsky suggest five areas where Jewish-Gentile couples will be challenged both before, during and after marriage:

The first area is in the realm of identity as the Jewish-Gentile couple will grapple with the question of “who am I” firstly in this cross-cultural relationship and then who are “we” and how are we supposed to look as we form a new life together. These questions may not be on the conscious level at first but will start to surface and become areas of confusion and anxiety and eventually great disunity if not properly acknowledged and then addressed.

The second area which relates and overlaps with the first is the two different religious and spiritual cultures that the Jewish-Gentile couple come from. These at first can seem as contrasted and different as night and day, especially if the Gentile partner or spouse is from a Christian heritage. Predominantly it is usually the Gentile partner who will be willing to try investigate and understand the Jewish side of their spouse with resistance from the Jewish spouse to necessarily do the same. There is obvious resistance and discomfort from the Jewish partner when it comes to the name of Jesus and discussion about Him.³ This will then spill over into the children when they come and how they are to be enculturated and is and can be a reason for great disharmony and loneliness in this Jewish-Gentile couple setting. From the Jewish person’s perspective their survival and the future survival of the Jewish people may play a great role here when it comes to the identity of their children.

³ Wan, Zaretsky p 94.

Every culture carries with it life cycle events and rites of passage. Even more so with Jewish-Gentile couples as weekly and annual rituals and religious observances can cause disagreement and tension and can become flash points for pain and disappointment. This can start with the wedding itself and the very ceremony being a challenge to their starting out in life together. Then comes the weekly and annual religious observances which can cause tension as to what to observe and where and with whom to spend it with in relation to extended family and faith community. This of course takes on another level when children are brought into this growing cross-cultural family.

The culture shock that happens as the couple enters each other's family domains is something which is a challenge to both and different couples learn and adapt to each others cultures for "better or for worse". They will be forced to figure out what their identity should be, the end result being a collaboration, competition or mutual rejection of each others culture and by default eventually each other.⁴

The fifth major area which overlaps the other four is in the area of the enculturation of the children. What starts out as romantic notions about offspring in the dating phase can soon degenerate into a nightmare scenario as conflicting cores, beliefs and values surface and turn what was to be "happily ever after" into something from the Terminator™. The enculturating and training of the children is often seen as one of the most challenging and threatening areas to marital unity and stability.⁵

From my experience of interacting with Jewish-Gentile couples, practically the usual points at which contact is made is at the major life-cycle events. This would firstly be as the

⁴ Wan, Zaertsky p 96

⁵ Wan Zaretzky p 96

couple is considering marriage and marriage options, and then later when the children come along- the issue of Bar Mitzvah and/or dedication will come to the fore and we are then given an opportunity to make a significant contribution to their life-choices and journey to the gospel. It may even come up sadly at the request of conducting a funeral service for one of the family members. It is at these points of entry that we can start a relationship and build it with the couple.

The Jewish-Gentile couple are in many many ways like Nicomdemus - they will usually seek us out to find out more. But in some ways they are also like the Samaritan woman in that they are feeling alone and almost like the outcast in society, on the very fringe of it. We need to help them realise that they are not unique, that they are an increasing sociological trend and that there are resources to help them navigate their lives together

Considering the above challenges facing Jewish-Gentile couples and considering that this is not only a present but increasing cultural trend we need to be looking at the training of ourselves to be ready to meet these folks where they are at and be able to provide a real resource for them as they negotiate their lives together. Part off this process will allow us to build relationship and introduce the gospel as a means of culture change and harmony for their lives. This needs to be dealt with in great sensitivity and care and not as “spiritual scalp” hunters leaving the victims bleeding and in the dust whilst off to find the “next kill.”

Not only do we need to be equipped and ready in this area but we should be engaging the greater Body of Christ, making them aware of these trends, as many Jewish-Gentile couples may be exploring and trying to make “a fit” in the local church, including Messianic Congregations which can be a great resource and place of equipping and can be an area of harmony, stability and unity for these couples and their children.

The challenge of the growing religious Jewish community.

The other emerging trend which will require new strategies of outreach, is the growing return amongst South African Jewry to what is seen as Jewish orthodoxy. This is an increasing trend amongst young university aged Jewish people too. A growing number of our Jewish people are searching for identity and are embracing the familiarity of a Jewish religious lifestyle as opposed to the unfamiliar. In essence to use a yiddishe term from my Father- they are becoming “*vrum*”. This drive has largely been due to the influential work of the Chabad movement on Jewish life in South Africa, who are at the forefront of their outreach to bring Jews back into the fold as they see it.

The challenge here is that these folk tend to wall themselves off from the outside world's influences and adopt a “laager” or ghetto style of Jewish life. They create communities and a lifestyle that insulates them from being reached by the gospel.

This is certainly a challenge to us as to develop strategies for reaching out to these communities. We will be having to look closer at the work we have been developing in the US and Israel, and learn from our colleagues there, and see how we can use what is working there amongst the ultra orthodox and try apply and modify that for the local situation here.

Into this equation I would hazard to say that our partnerships with the churches and Messianic Congregations will need to be engaged and strengthened to a greater degree so that cross pollination of our resources can be engaged to aid in reaching this segment of our people with the gospel.