

YOUNG NORTH AMERICAN EVANGELICALS & THE NEXT GENERATION OF JEWISH MINISTRY

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First, I would like to begin by expressing my appreciation to everyone who has invested enormous amounts of time and effort in order to make this wonderful gathering possible. I'd also like to thank Jim Melnick and Dan Sered for giving me this opportunity to share some thoughts on this very important and timely topic.

Second, before I get into the nuts and bolts of what I want to say, I need to introduce a few qualifications and clarifications. This particular session is focused on "The Next Generation" of Jewish ministry. This is obviously a very broad and multifaceted topic. I am not qualified, nor will I attempt, to address this in a general way. Rather, I will provide some of my own observations and thoughts based on my experiences within a very specific area of Jewish ministry. I am thankful to Jamie and Eli for also agreeing to share their perspectives, and I believe that what they share will address important aspects of this topic that I cannot.

And what of my own particular perspective? My specific ministry context, both in terms of my educational and professional experience, is the North American evangelical movement. I grew up primarily in a Southern Baptist context, I worshipped at a non-denominational congregation during my undergraduate years, and for graduate school, I attended Trinity Evangelical Divinity school, a seminary with a student body drawn from a cross-section of North American Evangelicalism.

So, with that having been said, it should be clear that I am coming to this topic from a very narrow perspective. I'll be discussing the next generation of Jewish ministry as it relates to Young North American Evangelical believers, which will henceforth be abbreviated as YNAE. I will identify a few problem areas as I see them, and a few potential strategies for successfully navigating these areas. The topics addressed below are wide-ranging, and in presenting them to such a diverse audience, it is inevitable that not all the issues addressed will be equally applicable to the specific ministry contexts of everyone here. My hope is that each reader will be able to filter through this paper and find the topics most applicable to their own context, and to use the observations offered as a starting point for future conversations.

### **#1: Preaching to the choir.**

We must do more than preach to the choir, if for no other reason than the choir is getting smaller. What I mean by this is that for years we in North American Jewish ministry have been able to successfully elicit support and recruit staff because we have done so from among those Christians with whom we have the most in common regarding our understanding of the importance of the Jewish people in salvation history. The next generation of YNAEs, however, tends to lack any particular concern for the Jewish people. Thus, we must be ready and willing to move beyond our current "alliances" and begin to form relationships with individuals and groups with whom we have traditionally had less in common.

Notice that this does *not* say: "YNAEs *don't care about* the Jewish people." Rather, the next generation of YNAEs- generally speaking - lacks *any particular concern* for Jewish ministry. Instead, they embrace the idea that all people groups are equally deserving and worthy of intentional ministry focus. Thus, a typical YNAE would say "Of course I care about Jewish ministry - just as much as I care about ministry in Africa or Southeast Asia, among Muslims or Buddhists." This dynamic makes it all the more difficult to catalyze support and engagement, as young evangelicals do not explicitly deny the important of Jewish ministry, while at the same time refusing to give it any special attention or treatment.

The result is that those of us involved in Jewish ministry must continually and intentionally venture outside of our comfort zones<sup>1</sup> and attempt to engage and win over YNAEs who do not currently agree with us that the Jewish people are worthy of special attention when it comes to intentional gospel proclamation and discipleship. As we are increasingly unable to rely on those with whom we have traditionally been allied, we will be forced to seek and form new alliances with YNAEs, and this will be a difficult and challenging task, for two key reasons.

First, because we cannot simply assume that YNAEs see and understand the special place occupied by the Jewish people in the overarching narrative of salvation history. Rather, before we even discuss modern practical applications (vis-a-vis missions, evangelism, and discipleship), we must first address the underlying philosophical and theological foundations and assumptions that have created an environment in which many YNAEs have little or no awareness of, or special concern for, Jewish ministry. In a context in which the Hebrew Bible is poorly understood in the pews because it is rarely preached from the pulpit, our biggest challenge will be to find creative, effective ways to help YNAEs better connect with and understand the *entirety* of God's Word.

Second, because we will be forced to confront many of our own preferences, preconceptions, and prejudices. Will we be able to form productive and lasting alliances and partnerships with individuals and groups with whom we disagree on what we feel to be crucial theological points, such as those Christians who adhere to some form of covenant theology and/or supersessionism? The LCJE has long been blessed by passionate and committed involvement from brothers and sisters - often from Europe - who adhere to what is often called "replacement theology." I am thankful for their support and in no way do I wish to diminish their contributions. My point here is simply that those of us involved in *North American* Jewish ministry are going to have to come to terms with increasing numbers of YNAEs holding theological views very different from our own regarding Israel and the Jewish people.

## **#2: "Missions" and "evangelism" aren't what they used to be.**

The way that these terms and concepts are used and understood by YNAEs is changing. I'm sure that most North Americans (and probably quite a few non-North Americans) here at this conference are well aware of the enormous increase in the use of the term "missional" among YNAEs. Based on the way in which the word is currently being used, and the frequency of such use, it's easy to get the feeling that anything and everything is missional!<sup>2</sup> In an era in which going to the grocery store, or hanging out with one's friends at a party, is considered "missional," we must face the challenge of effectively defining the essence and the contours of a traditional understanding of missions and evangelism, while at the same time discerning how to ensure that Jewish missions has a place at the relatively new "missional" table.

As with missions, evangelism too has begun to undergo changes in the way it is understood and undertaken among YNAEs. For various reasons, including especially the impact and ongoing influence of post-modernism, YNAEs are increasingly approaching evangelism from a narrative-

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Southern Baptist churches have been a traditional comfort zone for those involved in Jewish ministry in North America; their tendency towards pre-Millennial and Dispensational theology has made them natural allies.

<sup>2</sup> And while it is certainly true that Christians can and should live their lives in such a way that every aspect is a reflection of their identity in Messiah and their role in his service, the fact remains that there is and will always be a place for *missions*, that is, taking up the mantle of full-time service in the mission field.

based, relational orientation. Personal experience is valued just as much, if not more, than objective knowledge or truth claims. As such, we need to explore the ways in which YNAEs, with their highly relational orientation, can help us to adapt to the obstacles and challenges we will face in an increasingly relativistic context.

### **#3: Attack of the Clones.**

One of the best ways to set up the next generation for success is to refrain as much as possible from reshaping them in your own image.

You were not simply a clone of the generation before you. Rather, you learned from them and built on their work, but at the same time you have also blazed new paths and are creating your own distinct legacy.

The next generation will, Lord willing, do the same. We will learn from you and build on the work that you have done. And like you, we too will be required to blaze new paths as we adapt to new obstacles and challenges, and take advantage of new opportunities. The best way to prepare us for this is to allow us to be ourselves. Don't expect us to step into shoes that we will never be able to fill. Rather, allow us to build on the foundation that you have laid by adding our own distinct contributions, based on our unique talents, gifts, skills, and personalities.

This is admittedly vague, but necessarily so, as this dynamic will not look the same in each ministry or congregation represented here. In my own opinion, the best way for this scenario to play out would be akin to the development of musical styles over time. A young musician begins by learning to copy his musical idols, tentatively strumming the cords to their most famous songs. Over time, he or she becomes more confident and astute, able to recreate his or her favorite songs with ease. Eventually, however, our young musician begins to branch out and develop their own unique style, constructed with elements drawn from their favorite musicians, but now incorporating more refined personal elements that express the uniqueness and creativity that comes with blossoming into a full-fledged musician. The end result is that the young musician eventually produces his or her own unique music, but in which can be heard the important influences that shaped their musical identity.

My hope for the next generation of Jewish ministry is that our development process will mirror the musical process outlined above. That is, we as the next generation will learn by mimicking our mentors and recreating their biggest successes, but that eventually we will have the freedom to develop our own unique concepts, ideas, and ways of doing ministry. And while these new ideas and methods will be unique - as they seek to adapt to new ministry contexts - they will still be based on the hard work done by the previous generation, and in them will still be heard the stylistic influences of those who put in the time and effort to mentor us.

### **#4: Give us a chance . . . to fail.**

It has often been observed that one learns much more effectively through mistakes than through successes. In this sense, then, it is crucial that the next generation be given opportunities to do real, meaningful work, as well as the opportunity to fail and to learn from those failures.

First, regarding the opportunity to do real, meaningful work. Avoid, as much as possible, relegating the next generation to low level positions simply because of their age. By all means, start

them out in such positions, in order to allow them to gain maturity and experience. But if you find that, over time, few positions of importance are held by workers under 40, consider why this is the case. Just as I would encourage you to resist the urge to promote younger folks simply because they are younger (40-), I would also encourage you to resist the urge to fill key positions with older (40+) folks simply because they are older. Don't go the lazy route and simply assume that age is positively and directly correlated with gifts, talents, or skills. Honestly and objectively evaluate your staff - and any potential recruits - on the basis of their ability. If you see that someone has potential, give them a chance to get involved in a real way, rather than simply operating as background support.

Which leads me to my next point. The next generation needs more than just an opportunity to do real, meaningful work; they need the opportunity to be able to fail miserably.<sup>3</sup> The opportunity to fail is important for a number of reasons. First, no one is perfect. If we apply standards of perfection to the next generation, no one will be able to live up to those standards. Moreover, we could miss out on gaining an extremely effective and valuable asset.<sup>4</sup> Second, the opportunity to fail is important because, as I stated earlier, failure is the best way to learn. If we fail to give the next generation an opportunity to fail, and to learn from those failures, we will end up with a generation of leaders who are woefully inexperienced. It is better for the next generation to fail now, with the benefit of your oversight, guidance, and mentorship, than to fail years down the road, when they are on their own.

On a more immediate note, I am thankful that LCJE leadership has give us (Dan, Jamie, Eli, and myself) the opportunity to address this important topic. At the same time, I look forward to a time when more *organic* opportunities arise for younger presenters at international and regional LCJE meetings. In my view, having a "next generation" panel is necessary, but not ideal. Rather, there should simply be certain panels led by younger people (40 and under) because these people are naturally and organically being given responsibilities and freedom to pursue and develop various initiatives in their parent organization, and are thus especially qualified to present on those topics at an LCJE conference.

## **Conclusion:**

Some of you may already be having these discussions. Some of you may be way ahead of me, and are already implementing some of these ideas. If so - that's great! My goal in presenting this paper is *not* to criticize what any particular Jewish ministry is or isn't doing. Rather, my hope is that this paper will present some food for thought and for discussion, both at this conference and back in your respective ministry contexts around the world.

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<sup>3</sup> The term "failure" is obviously a subjective term. In this context, I use it simply to mean a failure to live up to whatever standards have been established by a ministry for any given task or project. I do believe that "success" in ministry is too often based on easily quantifiable metrics, but that is a topic for another presentation.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Edison and Babe Ruth are two examples in popular culture of individuals who experienced great successes intermixed with failure.