

Michael Rydelnik

Reaching Intermarried Couples: A Marketing Plan for Messianic Congregations

Introduction

Jewish people are marrying non-Jews as never before, leading to an unprecedented opportunity for the advance of the gospel among Jewish people. This assertion is based on the receptivity principle of the Church Growth movement. As initially articulated by Donald McGavran, the receptivity principle states that evangelism ought to be stressed among people groups who are most responsive to the gospel.¹

McGavran recognized that there would continue to be resistant people groups and that Missions ought only to occupy those fields until greater responsiveness developed.² However, he maintained that among some resistant groups there were population segments that were more open than the general populace.³ Efforts at evangelizing these resistant groups ought to be directed to these more responsive segments.

¹See McGavran's Understanding Church Growth, third edition, revised by C. Peter Wagner, 1990, pp. 179-92, for a full discussion of the receptivity principle.

²McGavran, pp. 190-91

³McGavran specified Muslims when making this assertion, but it would be true of other resistant people groups as well, cf. p. 189.

This leads directly to the relationship of Jewish evangelism and intermarried couples. Jewish people who marry non-Jews seem to be more responsive to the gospel than many other elements within the Jewish community. My evidence is purely anecdotal, based on my experience in Jewish ministry for some twenty years. Consistently, Jewish people who are considering intermarriage or have actually married a non-Jew, have demonstrated a greater openness to accepting Jesus as the Messiah. This article will seek to examine the reasons for this phenomenon and suggest a marketing strategy for Messianic Congregations that wish to take advantage of this opening.

The Facts of Intermarriage

Intermarriage, a practice which formerly was rare in the Jewish community has currently become commonplace. According to a major study sponsored by the Council of Jewish Federations, fifty-two percent of Jewish men and woman who married between 1985 and 1990 have taken non-Jewish spouses. The same study found that three quarters of the children of interfaith marriages are not raised as Jews; forty-one percent are raised in

other religions, and thirty-one percent with no religion.⁴ These figures contrast sharply with the eleven percent of Jewish people who intermarried prior to 1965.⁵

Despite this movement away from intra-Jewish marriage, the majority of intermarried couples still seek to maintain some form of Jewish identity. For example, sixty-two percent of intermarried couples attend an annual Passover Seder and fifty-nine percent still light Chanukah candles.⁶ Thus, there is an unexpected phenomenon of increasing liberalization concurrent with a desire to maintain some Jewish identity.

Each branch of Judaism has taken different approaches to what is perceived as a threat to the continued existence of the Jewish Community in the United States. At a 1992 Northeast regional conference of the orthodox Rabbinical Council of America, Rabbi Walter Walzburger strongly condemned intermarriage and the enrollment of non-Jewish spouses and children of gentile mothers into synagogue life. While the RCA is seeking

⁴Council of Jewish Federation 1990 National Jewish Population Study, cited in "The Intermarrying Kind," NEWSWEEK, July 22, 1991, pp. 48-49.

⁵Cited by Stewart Ain, "Reaching Intermarrieds" in THE JEWISH WEEK, January 10-16, 1992, pp. 4, 36.

⁶Cited by Stewart Ain, "Jews in the U.S." in THE JEWISH WEEK, p. 3.

new ways of dealing with the problem, it remains committed to discouraging intermarriage strongly and accepting only Gentiles that have undergone Orthodox conversion.⁷

The Conservative movement, represented by the Rabbinical Assembly, has called for new approaches to dealing with intermarriage. Rabbi Irwin Groner, in his presidential address to the assembly, said the movement's "first aim is to transform an interfaith marriage into a conversionary marriage." But "even if we cannot bring about the conversion of the non-Jewish spouse, we seek to persuade the family to affiliate with a congregation, to raise their children as Jews and to provide them with a Jewish education." Although children of non-Jewish mothers still would ultimately be required to convert to Judaism, it is the Conservative movements hope that by allowing enrollment into Jewish life and practice, non-Jewish spouses and children of non-Jewish mothers would ultimately desire to become Jews by choice.⁸

The Reform movement has opposed intermarriage but accepted intermarrieds. It generally allows non-Jewish spouses participation in

⁷Meryl Ain, "Re-examine Intermarriage, Orthodox Rabbis Urged," in THE JEWISH WEEK, Feb. 7-13, 1992, p. 4.

⁸Jonathan Mark, "Deal with Intermarriage, Conservative rabbis told" in THE JEWISH WEEK, May 3-9, 1991, pp. 4, 43.

synagogue life and accepts children of non-Jewish mothers as Jewish. In Reform congregations, eighty-eight percent provide some form of membership for non-Jews. With regard to leadership, eighty-seven percent allowed participation on all or most committees, but only twenty-seven percent permitted non-Jews to serve as officers.⁹

The various approaches to dealing with intermarriage by the Jewish community reflects an uncertainty that is evident among intermarried couples as well. Many have found the balance that they desire by embracing Jesus as their Messiah in a Messianic setting. Why is it that intermarried Jewish people are more open to believing in Jesus than other segments of the Jewish community? The answer is that the same factors that caused them to intermarry, also cause greater receptivity to the gospel. This will be examined in the following section.

The Reasons for Receptivity

There are several factors which apparently cause greater receptivity to the gospel on the part of intermarried Jewish people. First of all, Jews who

⁹Nina Mizrahi, "Non-Jews in the Synagogue" in REFORM JUDAISM, Summer, 1992, pp. 5-8

intermarry are more willing to break with family tradition. Although family pressure against intermarriage has lessened in recent years, there remains significant disapproval from parents and grandparents. Jews who intermarry are willing to endure this in order to follow their own conscience and convictions. McGavran noted that freedom from control is a cause of receptivity.¹⁰ Jewish people who break from the control of their family's desires with respect to intermarriage might very well be willing to do so when it comes to faith in Jesus.

Secondly, Jews who intermarry are less likely to have strong religious commitment. For example, according to the CJF study, sixty percent of those raised Reform Jews, fifty percent of those raised Conservative Jews, and twenty-five percent of those raised Orthodox, are intermarried.¹¹ It is apparent that the more liberal a Jewish person's upbringing, the more likely they are to intermarry. The rise in intermarriage is also attributed to the majority of American Jews believing that being Jewish means being part of a

¹⁰McGavran, p. 186.

¹¹"The Intermarrying Kind," p. 49.

cultural or ethnic group not a religious group.¹² Obviously, intermarriage by Jews is directly related to loss of religious commitment.

McGavran identified religious change as a cause of receptivity.¹³ Just as the general demise of Confucianism as an active faith in China led to gospel responsiveness among the Chinese, so also, Judaism's loss of influence among American Jews is producing greater response to the gospel. Although Jews who intermarry still identify ethnically, they are affected by religious change and thus more spiritually open.

A third factor in the receptivity of intermarried Jews is that they face special difficulties. It is common for intermarried couples to experience stress and conflict as a result of the clash of cultures within the marriage. It may be related to different communication styles or to differences in raising children.¹⁴ Whatever the cause, the stress is likely to produce greater spiritual receptivity. The Jewish partner is more willing to consider Jesus as the Messiah if worshipping Him in a culturally Jewish setting is possible. It

¹²David Firestone, "Most Jews Marrying Non-Jews" in *NEWSDAY*, June 7, 1991, p. 4.

¹³McGavran, p. 185.

¹⁴Judy Petsonk and Jim Remsen, *The Intermarriage Handbook: A Guide for Jews and Christians*, Quill, 1988, pp. 85-104 gives an overview of potential culture clashes which includes issues of childrearing.

is viewed as a satisfactory compromise for both partners. This certainly conforms to McGavran's concept that people under stress and trauma have greater receptivity.¹⁵

There certainly could be other factors which make Jewish people who intermarry more open to the Messiahship of Jesus. However, identifying the reasons is not as important as seizing the opportunity this openness creates. The following section will suggest some marketing strategies for reaching intermarried couples.

The Strategies for Outreach

The phenomenal increase in intermarriage provides a wide open door for outreach to these couples. Several messianic congregations have noted a positive response by those who have intermarried. Although various congregations have made sporadic attempts at reaching out to these couples, no messianic congregation has yet to develop a coordinated, consistent

¹⁵McGavran discusses the trauma produced by conquest. Nevertheless, as he says, "a traumatic experience...has great meaning for church growth," p. 183.

marketing strategy.¹⁶ It is imperative for messianic congregations that wish to reach intermarrieds to become systematic and proactive in marketing for this unique segment. The following are some steps that can be taken.

Community Intermarriage Seminar

It is common for Jewish Community Centers to sponsor seminars on intermarriage. Since the basic Jewish solution to intermarriage is conversion, this is generally the emphasis of these seminars. This generally has an alienating effect on couples for whom conversion is not an option. Having noted these trends, Olive Tree Congregation of Plainview, Long Island offered a community seminar on Intermarriage. The intent was to offer a messianic solution to the issue.

The first step in holding this event was to form a team which would oversee and organize the seminar. They worked with the elders in obtaining a limited budget and proceeded to plan the seminar.

Next, the intermarriage outreach team selected a date and location for the seminar. It was decided that holding it in the congregational building would inhibit attendance so a community meeting room in the town library

¹⁶Marketing for religious organizations should not be viewed as shifty sales techniques but rather as "meeting needs profitably." For further study of this very responsible approach, see, Norman Shawchuck, Philip Kotler, Bruce Wrenn, Gustave Rath, Marketing for Congregations, Abingdon, 1992.

was reserved instead. This neutral location would make potential attenders feel more comfortable. Furthermore, the cost for rental was only a minimal fee of \$25.

Thirdly, the team began to advertise the event. Rather than pay huge fees for major Newspaper ads, the team opted to advertise in small community papers. They also posted notices of the upcoming meeting in local stores. All advertising specified that the seminar was sponsored by "the Interfaith Committee of Olive Tree Congregation."

A fourth step was that for the month previous to the seminar the congregation held regular prayer times for the event. Furthermore, each congregant was encouraged to invite two intermarried couples to the seminar.

A fifth element in the planning was to organize a refreshment committee to provide coffee and cake after the seminar. This was done to encourage conversation and meeting new people.

Along with all this planning, the congregational leader was asked to prepare a lecture and discussion of intermarriage from a Messianic perspective. He, in turn, prepared seminar notes and a handout for attenders.

On the night of the seminar, no one knew what to expect. The community meeting room could only hold fifty people. To insure that it would not be empty, fifteen congregants were asked to attend. Most team members felt that if the event would draw only five couples it would be a success. However, the response was far better than expected. Thirty-six came in addition to the congregations fifteen. They were composed of 18 intermarried or engaged couples. The discussion was friendly, fun, and well received. Two couples began attending the congregation regularly as a result.

It was decided that better follow-up would have enhanced the effectiveness of the seminar. Moreover, the impact would be greater if the congregation would repeat the program twice a year, a month before Chanukah/Christmas and Passover/Easter.

Direct Mail

Another messianic congregation, Joy of Israel, in Southern Connecticut, sought to minister to newly married interfaith couples via the mail. Stew Weinisch, the congregational leader at the time would comb the local newspapers for wedding announcements that were obviously

intermarried. If no address was listed in the paper, the couple information was found through phone books or directory assistance. This is the letter that was sent:

Mazal Tov and congratulations on your wedding!

We at Joy of Israel want to wish you blessings and happiness in your recent steps into matrimony.

We are aware that marriage often presents new challenges and religious concerns. These issues may even grow in importance when children come along. Then the question of how to raise the children arises. In many cases, families may choose to ignore the problem by neglecting religious instruction.

I would like to take this opportunity to introduce you to our congregation. Joy of Israel is a congregation of both Jewish and non-Jewish people who have come to believe in the Messiah of Israel, Jesus. We offer an enriching alternative to religious dilemmas.

Enclosed is a brochure with more details regarding our congregation. Feel free to visit Joy of Israel or to call me. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have regarding intermarriage and other religious matters.

Again, may I wish you the heartiest blessings in your new marriage.

Sincerely Yours,

Stewart Weinisch
Congregational Leader

Although this approach did not receive a very strong response, it is not because of ineffectiveness. Rather, it failed to address the issue it raised in the letter, namely children. Newly married couples do not have the same concerns in this area as do new parents. To deal with this issue, different letters should have been sent regularly (2-3 times per year) for up to five years. This would have given time for children to be born, and perhaps elicited greater response. Children in intermarriages have a way of eliciting religious interest in their parents.

Advertising

Advertising in local papers is an effective way to establish the identity of a messianic congregation as a home for intermarried partners. It is not always necessary to pay for the ads, For example, in Essex County, New Jersey the local paper invited Beth Messiah Congregation of Livingston, NJ to write an article about intermarried couples at the congregation. The headline read, "Intermarried Couples Find a Home a Beth Messiah" and the article detailed the experience of intermarried couples who found harmony at Beth Messiah. Although some in the Jewish community objected to the content, several intermarried couples came to investigate.

If a congregation desires to focus on these couples, it would be wise to commit some of the congregations resources to advertising the special programs designed for intermarrieds. It should also pursue free coverage as the Livingston congregation did.

Programming

Messianic congregations can not only attempt to draw intermarried couples, they must also seek to meet their special needs with appropriate programming. One programming suggestion is to offer counseling for the unique difficulties that intermarrieds face.

A second programming suggestion is to provide small group Bible studies specially designed for intermarriage issues. Subjects such as unity in Messiah, raising children, dealing with family, and understanding culture, to name a few, can help intermarrieds cope with their problems. These Bible studies would also be excellent as a follow-up for those who attend intermarriage seminars.

Since intermarrieds continue to participate in Jewish Holy Day observance, programming should also include holiday services which include both Jews and non-Jews as active participants. Another programming

suggestion is to have the children's program specifically address the concerns of growing up in a mixed household.

Finally, messianic congregations ought to facilitate an atmosphere conducive to accepting intermarried couples. The worship services and messages should regularly address the unity, harmony, and peace that Messiah brings. Care should be given not to make services excessively heavy in traditional Jewish liturgy so as not to alienate non-Jewish spouses. Equal participation by Jews and non-Jews should be pursued aggressively.

The only word of caution to congregations is that they should be careful to apply the plan comprehensively because a sporadic approach will not be as effective.

Whether it is through community seminars, direct mail, advertising, or programming designed for intermarrieds, the ultimate aim must remain clear. That is to enable intermarried couples find the peace and harmony they seek by uniting them through faith in Jesus, the Messiah of Israel and the world.

Conclusion

Shortly after I left seminary and entered into leadership of a Columbus, Ohio messianic congregation, I met Don and Leslie. They had been engaged for two years and had delayed getting married because they

were uncertain of how to work out their prospective intermarriage. Don, a Jewish computer programmer, and Leslie, a Catholic medical technician, sensed they would have family difficulties if they were to go through with their wedding.

At a friend's suggestion, they decided to visit Beth Messiah to see if the Messianic faith could unite their prospective marriage. They both became regular attenders. Within two months Don had trusted in Messiah; at six months Leslie had as well. They became the first couple I ever married. Today they have a solid marriage with two kids and a strong testimony as a believing couple.

As I look back on this true story, I recognize that Don and Leslie's experience did not come about because of any strategic plan on my part. But it would not be accurate to view their story as a random event either. Rather, it demonstrates that messianic congregations are uniquely capable of reaching intermarried couples. If these congregations can serve intermarrieds without a marketing plan, how much greater success can they have if they apply an effective one.