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Missionary group builds new facility in Toronto

By **ANDY LEVY-AJZENKOPF**
Staff Reporter

Julius Ciss calls them “Hebrew Christians.” Ciss, executive director of the Toronto chapter of Jews for Judaism, is referring to Christian missionary groups that have made it a specialized practice within the evangelical community to target unaffiliated or “assimilated” Jews who are searching for a deeper spiritual connection to the world.

Of particular concern to Jews in the Toronto area, Ciss said, is a group called Chosen People Ministries (CPM), a rival to the Jews for Jesus organization. This group, he said, uses quasi-Jewish propaganda to great effect to lure susceptible Jews away from even a nominal connection to their Jewish roots and toward the acceptance of “Messiah Yeshua” - a.k.a. Jesus.

CPM recently announced that it’s nearing the final stages of building its new Toronto Messianic Centre and national headquarters on Bridgeland Avenue, just west of Yorkdale Mall. For the past 15 years, it had operated out of a small house on Sheppard Avenue, between Yonge and Bathurst streets.

Ciss said the group has refined its pitch to Jews over the years, creating spaces where the Gospel is preached in a Jewish cultural atmosphere that makes it easier for Jews to believe they’re staying true to their roots while they’re being taught that they can only be saved by accepting Jesus.

Jews for Judaism’s primary mission is to prevent groups such as CPM from recruiting Jews.

A reformed Jew for Jesus member himself – he said he spent several years in the organization before realizing he’d made a “horrible” mistake – Ciss said the methods used by the various missionary groups are specifically designed to break down psychological barriers that many Jews have erected against Christian proselytizing.

“These are basically churches operating under the guise of a Jewish patina,” Ciss said. “Their presentations can be very deceptive to an assimilated Jew who is looking for spiritual alternatives.”

For instance, one of the ways missionaries get Jews to attend services is instead of holding them on Sundays like other churches, they will instead “ask you to visit their ‘synagogue’ on Shabbat. And that has a totally different, Jewish ring to it.”

Instead of referring to the New Testament, the missionaries refer to the “Brit ha’Hadashah” – the Hebrew translation for the name of the Christian Bible – and instead of asking Jews to accept Jesus as their lord and saviour, they instead ask them to accept “Yeshua ha’Mashiach,” he said.

In their presentation to Jews, Ciss said, these groups have “altered, renovated and distorted all of Christian terminology, customs, symbols and traditions to make them look Jewish in order to make [Jews] feel less inhibited at considering Christianity as an option.”

Ciss said it’s his understanding that CPM is the second-largest group of its kind in the world, next to Jews for Jesus.

Rabbi Michael Skobac, Jews for Judaism’s director of education, said the ministries have an increasingly vigorous mandate.

“Chosen People Ministries has become increasingly aggressive in the last few years,” Rabbi Skobac said. “They opened a centre in Sderot [Israel] and another in the heart of the Jewish community in Flatbush, New York. Their successes are our [communities’] failures.”

Rabbi Skobac said the typical profile of converted Jews



Jews for Judaism Toronto’s director of education Rabbi Michael Skobac, left, and Julius Ciss, the organization’s executive director.

he encounters are those who grew up in traditional Jewish households and went to Jewish school but say they never experienced Judaism in a spiritual way.

“They say they only ever experienced it as a heritage or tradition that didn’t resonate as a vibrant, spiritual path [and] didn’t involve building a personal relationship with God” that Christianity offers them, he said.

Jews for Judaism keeps an inventory of missionary groups operating in Canada. There are some 100-plus such organizations now in Canada, the majority of which are based in southern Ontario, Ciss said.

“Unfortunately, this messianic approach to evangelizing Jews is becoming very successful,” Ciss cautioned. “They are attracting intermarried couples... because there’s always a conflict between the Jewish and gentile partners” as to how to make the marriage work and how best to raise children.

He said missionary groups “are very good” at making both partners feel spiritually comfortable by blending Christianity and Judaism together to make them feel harmonious.

But the reality is very different, Ciss said.

“There’s nothing about Christianity that Judaism can accept, which is why [Jews] reject the entire premise and why, as a people, we’ve never accepted the claims of Christianity,” he said.

“But today, these missionary groups are making Jews feel that it’s kosher” to convert, he added.

He said it’s only recently that the groups have made more inroads in the Jewish community, likely because of growing rates of assimilation and intermarriage.

According to a 2001 census analysis by UIA Federations Canada and UJA Federation of Greater Toronto, of people in Toronto who identify ethnically as Jews, some six per cent, or 10,955 people, practise a religion other than Judaism. And most of those, Ciss said, are practising Christianity.

“One thing is clear: the numbers [of Jewish converts to Christianity] are growing,” he said, adding that while missionizing accounts for a lot of them, the missionary movement is now educating other Christian evangelicals on how to better target Jews for conversion.

“The reality is, let’s be honest, a Jew who is assimilating is not interested in wearing a yarmulke, or keeping Shabbat or wearing tzitzit... and many Jews are

even converting to Christianity through the mainstream evangelical churches. The Jewish community is not aware of how great the problem really is. They’re not aware of the scope.”

Ciss worries that the Jewish community is blind to the phenomenon because it’s not happening in the public sphere but is occurring much more on the Internet.

“Just because the community doesn’t see the missionaries on the street corners” doesn’t mean the missionizing isn’t happening, Ciss said. ■

Jews for Judaism Warns of New Missionary Danger



Chosen People Ministries (CPM) opened its new “Messianic Centre” in Canada’s largest Jewish community on December 5, 2010.

In emails to its supporters, CPM stated that its vision is, “to have a building in the midst of Toronto’s Jewish community that will be a presence for Messiah Yeshua (Jesus)... Unserved Jewish people are hesitant to attend events that take place in a church building. In order to reach them effectively, we need to be able to provide a neutral meeting place — a Messianic Jewish Centre!”

CPM, one of 1,000 Christian missionary groups that spend a combined \$325 million annually to convert Jews worldwide, further stated, “The Gospel will be proclaimed in a Jewish cultural context, making it easier for Jews to respond to the claims of Messiah. Staff, volunteers and other believers will be trained in Jewish evangelism. It will be a base of Jewish evangelistic outreach in the Greater Toronto Area and Headquarters for administering our overall strategy and work across Canada.”

Formerly called “The American Board of Missions to the Jews”, Chosen People Ministries has become increasingly aggressive in recent years in what may be an effort to overtake Jews for Jesus as the leading missionary group targeting the Jewish community. The new Toronto centre is just one of their many recent initiatives. Due in part to CPM’s relentless efforts, over 300,000 Jews worldwide have converted to Christianity in recent years.

In response, JEWS FOR JUDAISM provides Jewish communities with preventive counter-missionary education programs, literature and audio materials to inoculate them against this growing threat, and offers one-on-one counselling to rescue Jews from missionaries, cults and eastern religions.

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