

The Future of Messianic Congregations in Germany

- *Challenges, Obstacles, and Possibilities*

by **Vladimir Pikman**



After "The Wave"

Although I have been involved in the contemporary Messianic movement in Germany since almost the beginning of its existence, it still seems unbelievable to me that since 1991, the Jewish community in Germany has been (in percentage) the fastest growing Jewish community in Jewish history, and since 1994, the number of Jewish believers in Yeshua (Jesus) has been growing faster than anywhere else. All this is due to the massive Jewish immigration of so-called "Russian Jews" from the former Soviet Union.

Since 1991, the Jewish population in Germany has grown from a maximum of 30,000 to ca. 300,000 in 2008. 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 in 2008. From no Messianic congregations in 1994, we have today more than 40 Messianic congregations and groups in Germany, which were established over just a few years.

Thus, there has been a powerful and evident revival among the Russian Jews in Germany, a revival that is impossible to systemize and that seemed to grow "by itself." But the situation has changed, and the wave of revival has probably been over for a couple of years. And Jewish life is also very different in Germany today than it was a decade ago, when the revival began. For example, the Messianic movement is established and known among the Jewish people, who are primarily negatively informed about it by various Jewish organizations; immigration has slowed down; the majority of Russian Jews are well established and used to their new country and its culture; the youth and children speak better German than Russian; Jewish communities are run primarily by Russian Jews due to their overwhelming majority, which leads to more comfortable fellowship and abundant services to the Russian Jews in those communities; Russian Jews either became much more assimilated into a comfortable German lifestyle without any desire to hear about God, or became more conscious about being Jewish while following the common misconception that Jesus is not for the Jews; and the Messianic movement and the Russian Jewish outreach experienced a stabilization phase, coming to a new level of leadership and structural and spiritual maturity.

This new situation has had a dramatic impact on the existing Messianic congregations and the movement in general, bringing new challenges, obstacles, and possibilities, some of which will be discussed below.

Challenges

Disappointment and Discouragement among Many Messianic Leaders

Ministry during a revival, while not easy, is definitely very exciting, e.g. the leaders can see the fruits of their ministry; people are coming to Yeshua in significant numbers; groups and congregations are dynamic, with new people coming and getting involved; new believers are quickly maturing and becoming reliable; and people are showing their initiative and willingness to serve. Almost everything seems to work. Such a time is always the desire of every minister.

However, revival as a great blessing often remains unappreciated by those who came to ministry during it – they simply do not know anything else but revival. It is easy to get used to the time of blessing, thinking that it is normal and will last forever. But it usually takes much longer to adjust to life when the revival is not there anymore. And this has been exactly the case in Germany in recent years.

Especially hard hit were the Messianic leaders in Germany. Many of them came to faith in Yeshua during the revival among Russian Jews, either in the countries of the former Soviet Union or in Germany. They began their ministry during this revival. They neither had time nor felt the need for any formal theological or ministerial education.¹ Most of them were not able to learn from the Messianic movements in other countries or to get access to international Messianic communities other than the Russian-speaking ones.

The Messianic movement in Germany remained largely isolated from the international Messianic community and from German Christianity. Messianic congregations in Germany copied the congregations in which their leaders became believers. If a leader became a believer in a church, he tried to unite his church experience with what he saw in a Messianic congregation that he respected. Because everything went well for a number of years, unconsciously, it seemed that everything would always work the same way. But the ministry was slowly becoming more difficult and the circumstances were changing. However, this remained unnoticed with the hope that everything would come back to “normal.”

The pressure was growing and the leaders were more and more discouraged. Finally, some leaders became sick, left the ministry, or dramatically changed their theological and ministerial positions. In the last few years, we have seen several leaders leaving their ministry. Without a solid theological basis, without strong mentors standing by, without lessons learned from the Messianic movements in other countries, and

¹ As far as I know, I am the only Messianic leader in Germany to hold a theological degree; another leader is working toward a degree.



without the practical skills to stay firm without revival, the leaders became discouraged, which significantly contributed to the weakening of the Messianic movement and congregations in Germany. There is no Messianic congregation in Germany that can testify to significant growth in the last few years. But there are always opportunities in every crisis.

Therefore, the challenge for the Messianic leaders in Germany is to overcome their discouragement and appreciate their new circumstances, learning to persevere in this situation, waiting for a new revival “wave” to come. Training, mentoring, educating, and networking with the broader Messianic and church body in Germany and in other countries would probably be very helpful.

Hard Work with Less Excitement

After the exciting years, it is challenging to learn that it is normal at this stage to see less fruit and experience less exciting things, while working hard and standing firm for our faith. Many changes in methodology of outreach and congregational life have to be made. This requires overcoming normal human conservatism, and hard work.

Disappointment among Members of the Messianic Congregations

Disappointment among Messianic leaders unavoidably leads to disappointment among congregation members. Sensing the frustration of the leaders, people, who naturally want to follow those with passion and excitement, are starting to look for other congregations, groups, or leaders. The Messianic movement in Germany is currently struggling, and it is natural for people to seek a fellowship without such struggle. Therefore, many former members of Messianic congregations and groups left, primarily going to new and emerging Christian churches that grant them more exciting “life” but lack Jewish sensitivity or even tolerate anti-Semitism. Other former members of Messianic communities became disappointed with the movement, and decided to personally “believe in Yeshua” while moving away from any fellowship. And many even left the Messianic faith, primarily going back to their secular life² or, more seldom, to Judaism. The number of Jewish participants in Messianic services declined noticeably.

Here the challenge is for Messianic believers to re-appreciate their faith and calling. Such appreciation, while being communicated through their lifestyle, can easily provoke jealousy among others, and even in those who for whatever reason left the Messianic movement.

Identity Challenge

The German Messianic movement, while not paying attention to this issue at the beginning of its existence due to the revival, recently entered the phase of its identity struggle. The question “Who are we?” became

² They simply lost their interest in the Messianic life and faith in Yeshua. They say that they still believe, but the “fire” is not there any more.

controversial. In a certain sense, it is indeed not easy to balance between belonging to the Jewish people and to the church at the same time.

Some congregations decided to keep their "Christian" identity, while having some Jewish elements in their lifestyle. However, such congregations find it difficult to justify their existence. The evangelistic reason³ does not work, because the Jewish people in Germany are not attracted to the "Jewish" elements in Messianic congregations any more than they were before.

The majority of congregations and groups in Germany understand the distinctive nature of the Jewish calling, and are willing to adopt more of the Jewish lifestyle and worship to take better care of this calling. However, they lack knowledge and experience in this regard.

Therefore, the challenge is to come up with a clear, biblically-founded, historically and culturally proper Messianic identity for Germany, and to live accordingly.

Cultural Challenge

Because the majority of the Messianic believers in Germany are originally Russian-speaking, the Russian culture and language have dominated the movement for a number of years. However, today the Messianic children and youth speak better German than Russian, being primarily exposed to the German culture in their schools. Many young adults and middle-aged immigrants were also well exposed to the German culture, and have ceased being proper "Russians." Thus, proper Russian language and culture were retained only by the elderly people, who will dominate the Messianic movement if nothing is changed.

Also, many German Jews and Jewish people from other countries are getting interested in the Messianic movement. And the interest among Germans is also growing. Previously, these groups were unfortunately "left behind."

Therefore, the challenge is to culturally adjust the Messianic movement to the new circumstances.

Obstacles

Liberalism of German Society

The liberalism of German society makes it more difficult to keep any Messianic identity. Preaching Yeshua is not popular, and any evangelistic attempt is considered "fundamentalism." It is difficult to enjoy sharing the gospel in such an atmosphere, and it motivates people to keep their faith a "personal" matter, which hinders appreciation and healthy "pride" concerning our faith. It hinders encouragement in the Messianic movement.

³ E.g. "a Jewish person can come to such a congregation and feel at home, while a church is something foreign to them."

Eagerness of Churches to “Steal” Believers

Some Russian-speaking churches, being under the strong influence of replacement theology, talk Messianic believers out of Messianic congregations and groups. They diminish the significance of Jewish identity, and encourage Messianic believers to be more “spiritual” by completely assimilating into Gentile Christianity. In the given situation of the Messianic movement today, this takes some potential leaders away from the Messianic movement and weakens it.

Absence of Available Messianic Educational Institutions and Materials

While Messianic leaders in Germany urgently need education and training, there is as yet no educational or training institution in Germany that is proper for this. Although a few Messianic leaders attended, or are attending, Christian educational institutions due to the absence of Messianic ones, the existing Bible schools in Germany are not designed to respond to the needs of the Messianic movement. This hinders spiritual and ministerial development of Messianic leaders.

Difficulties of Getting Help from Other Countries

Although there are many Messianic human resources and materials in the world, the language barrier is an obstacle to using them in Germany. Most of the available Messianic scholars speak neither Russian nor German. The same is true for the materials. At the same time, only a limited number of the Messianic leaders and believers in Germany speak English well enough to use these resources.

Financial Limitations

An obstacle that the Messianic movement in Germany has in common with the movement in many other countries is financial limitations. The Messianic leaders in Germany have very limited access to financial support from other countries, and it is not easy to raise support in Germany itself.

Possibilities*Education for Leaders*

There is great interest among the Messianic leaders at this time to be trained and educated. Many of them are willing to be trained, taught, and mentored. To provide theological and ministerial training for the leaders of the Messianic movement in Germany is absolutely necessary at this stage. We need to use the pause after the past revival to prepare leaders for the next one.

Stabilization and Structuring

Instead of considering the current situation as stagnation, it would be good to use it to stabilize the Messianic movement through developing structures for future growth. What was not possible during the revival is



possible in more quiet circumstances. And first attempts are being made to do this.

Spiritual Maturity Based on Faith

As we have discussed before, it is hard to have much excitement in the German Messianic movement today. This creates a great opportunity for maturing in faith, without this faith being based on pure excitement or enjoyment of the fruits of revival.

Messianic Materials

The felt need for printed and other types of materials creates a market for such materials. This would be a good time to start various Messianic publications in German and Russian (together with those in other Russian-speaking countries). These can include books, magazines, periodicals, journals, recordings, and Internet sites.

Bridges to Other Messianic and Christian Groups

The current situation motivates the Messianic movement to seek the support of other like-minded believers. It drives various Messianic groups to each other, and helps them to appreciate Christianity and the Messianic movement worldwide. Therefore, it would be wise for Messianic congregations and groups to develop good contacts not only with each other, but also with churches and Christian organizations in Germany and worldwide. This will create a healthy, biblical sense of unity and fellowship while providing opportunities for joint outreach, learning from the experience of others, prayer support, and even financial help.

The Messianic movement in Germany will hopefully also develop relationships with Messianic movements, congregations, and organizations in other countries. While doing this, it is important to be careful to choose the biblically healthy ones. The theological education and training discussed above can help in this regard. Developing relationships does not mean coming under the authority of someone else; the Messianic movement in Germany has to develop in an appropriate way for Germany, complementing the Messianic movement and Christianity worldwide by its uniqueness.

Before “The Wave”

There is a growing expectation among Messianic leaders in Germany of a new revival among Jewish people. We hope that by using the opportunities that the challenges are giving us, and wisely dealing with the obstacles, we will be ready for the new revival. And we pray that this will be the case.

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