

Paving a two-way street in interfaith dialogue

With Eagles' Wings, young pastors travel to Israel to build bridges with Jews

By David Brummer

GROWING UP, Adam Mesa wore a Star of David around his neck and an Israeli flag hung over his bed. Although not born Jewish and raised Christian, Mesa was told that he is a descendant of Spanish-Jewish immigrants and, as a child, was deeply proud of that heritage.

But over time, peer pressure and anti-semitic remarks began to chip away his armor and eventually, the necklace and flag came down leaving his passion for his Jewish heritage dormant.

That is until Rev. Robert Stearns, founder and executive director of Eagles' Wings, invited Mesa to join a delegation of pastors for a comprehensive tour of the Holy Land – a transformative experience for Mesa.

"From 15-28 there was no longer a desire to connect to Israel or my Jewish roots," Mesa says. "It wasn't until I had the opportunity to come here, and I stood in the halls of Yad Vashem, even though I had no personal connection to the Holocaust, heard other stories of Jews who were persecuted and it just radically changed me. I had a connection with my heritage that made me feel like being home."

Now, on his second trip to Israel with Eagles' Wings, he is already planning his third visit to the Holy Land where he will bring congregants of his Abundant Living Family Church to see the country for themselves.

Such a development is not surprising for Stearns, who sees 40% of Eagles' Wings participants subsequently return with congregants and lead their very own mission to Israel.

For this particular trip, Eagles' Wings, in partnership with its West Coast branch the Israel Christian Nexus, selected 30 young pastors of major Evangelical churches with huge social media influence.

Mesa alone, preaches to a congregation of 12,000 and has 17,500 followers on Instagram. And the pastor has shared his



experience in real time for everyone of his followers to see.

"I feel privileged to be able to tell these stories and use my influence. People think I look like their neighbor, or someone they know, so they want to listen to what I have to say. That's why I've taken on the responsibility to tell the story of Israel. This is our job," Mesa, whose youthful face and tattooed arms belie the stature and influence he possesses.

Tapping into the social media milieu when advocating for Israel is a necessary evil for Stearns, who has brought more than 25,000 Christians to Israel since the 1990s.

"I remember various crises Israel has faced and we've been able to activate our network and in very short order get a significant amount of people to respond or

be aware of the situation because of social media. I think social media is a necessary evil in today's world. I can't stand it, but don't think we'll be able to get away from it. If that's the reality, then let's harness it for good," Stearns explained.

Stearns sees the trip as an opportunity to reignite Evangelical passion for the Holy Land among the Millennial generation. While advocating and visiting Israel was a given for parents and grandparents of Millennials, this isn't always the case for a generation that is social media savvy and tends to back the underdog, which some perceive the Palestinians to be in this complex geopolitical conflict.

"The church in general has always been a fan of the underdog, but I think in moments where the media spins things in certain



Adam Mesa in conversation while overlooking the Temple Mount

directions, they begin to hear a dialogue that the Palestinians or Syrian refugees are the underdog,” says Christian Aranza of Houston’s Valley Rise Church. “Now, that I’ve been here, I can say, ‘You’re missing parts of this story.’ What you’re seeing in the news is not always a true reflection of what’s happening here.”

For Aranza, he hopes this trip will teach him how to continue the interfaith dialogue he’s having in Israel back at home.

“My push is to connect not just with the land of Israel, but with Jews in America as well. It has been fairly difficult, and I mean this in the best way, to connect with Jewish people in America,” he lamented. “We

EAGLES' WINGS



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Bishop Robert Stearns (center) speaks with a delegation of pastors during their recent visit to Israel

come back excited and are like, ‘Let’s be best friends!’ And they say, ‘Wait, hold on a minute, we don’t know you.’”

“When I go back, I want to create ways where this can be a two-way street,” he adds.

So while the trip brings pastors to the obligatory holy sites like the Western Wall, it also provides the clergymen with the opportunity to meet Israeli political and diplomatic VIPs, including US Ambassador David Friedman.

“This is the ambassador who has the blessed privilege of seeing the embassy move to Jerusalem. I think there’s a certain prestige and honor to that,” Stearns says. “This current ambassador very much understands and is attuned to the rich dialogue between Evangelical Christianity and the Jewish people.”

For Aranza, he is interested in fostering that dialogue back home. While in Israel, he hoped to learn from a people and state that has accomplished so much in a brief period of time.

“Five countries declared war on Israel. For me alone, as a former veteran, I think,

‘God himself had to win that war.’ When you think of the sheer improbability of that happening, it not only shows the resiliency of the Jewish spirit, but the hand of God with the Jewish people,” he excitedly exclaimed after visiting Independence Hall.

For many of the pastors on this trip, they feel an obligation to not only tell the ancient story of the Jewish people, but the modern one occurring today.

“I don’t know if we have failed the Jews, but I don’t think we’ve effectively told the story of the nation of Israel. We tell the Bible story as pastors, but it’s modern day history didn’t occur that long ago. It’s recent history. And the fact that we don’t say, ‘Hey did we forget they beat five countries single-handedly? That’s pretty impressive.’ We failed to tell that story, so people say, ‘I want to go meet the people who did that.’”

“We don’t demand anything, but our hope is, our quiet expectation is, as they come alive to Zionism to the story of the Jewish people that they’ll be engaged and involved,” Stearns says with a smile. “And, thankfully, the vast majority of them are.” ■