

More Than 7,000 Remain!

By PAUL J. SCHARF

My journey with The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry took me to Kansas this past weekend, to speak four times at a church in Salina.

I have now spoken on behalf of The Friends of Israel upon the soil of the following 12 states: California, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Texas and Wisconsin. Later this year, Lord willing, I will add Missouri and Wyoming to the list—along with the nation of Israel!

I've also exhibited at conferences in two other states: Nebraska and New Mexico. Kentucky will join that group in June of this year. I also have plans to be in New York and Pennsylvania on our Christian Leaders' Encounter trip.

In my travels I have, of course, learned many lessons. Certainly, I'm always trying to become a better presenter—but I've also tried to become a better traveler. I have seen many parts of the country previously foreign to me. I've met many new people, seen many diverse customs—even tried several new kinds of food. I've sweat through some really hot days in Texas, and I've left early and stayed in hotels trying to outsmart the snow. Delayed flights have become all too common.

But the biggest lesson I've learned in all these travels is that people remain people no matter where you go. Human nature simply does not change.

In fact, I've really noticed something quite astounding in all of these different ministry contexts. It's that wherever I go, I sense the same basic forces affecting the way the people of the local area function in ministry.

When I visit a church or a home Bible study group, the first thing I often observe—regardless of where I might be—is how similar the dynamics really are compared to what I am used to. Oh, the people are different, of course. The specific issues of concern may be unique. Yet, somehow the whole scenario seems very familiar.

Many times, the culture of churches in a local area will be tied to some type of larger ministry in that region. Often, it's a Bible college or seminary. Sometimes it may be the association of churches in which those congregations find fellowship. Or the culture may even be influenced by a particular Christian radio station. The local churches' world revolves, to some extent, around that larger ministry. Its views, convictions and strengths—as well as its weaknesses—often spill over into the practices of the churches located around it.

As I travel from one locality to another, the names, faces and situations, may change, but the undercurrents really don't. The *conservatives* in one location might be the *liberals* (relatively speaking) in another. The *stronger brother* in one scenario might be viewed as the *weaker brother* in another. But once I learn the names of the players, and

the questions that are pressing upon them, I begin to see how the whole entity really forms sort of a parallel universe to others that I've been in before.

Now, the folks in that little universe may think that it is the only one out there—and that everyone is watching them. Truly, that is not the case. Travel just a few hundred miles away, and you're likely to be in a different universe of a similar kind.

What is the takeaway from all of this? I think the biggest lesson should be the need for humility. God's vineyard is very vast. None of us are the last "who have not bowed the knee to Baal" (Rom. 11:4). It is comforting to know that God has "reserved for (Himself) seven thousand men" (Rom. 11:4) of the same caliber—and, actually, there are many more than that. Whatever you are doing for the Lord, know that many others are doing the same things—and, just maybe, doing them even better. May God give each of us humility to learn from others and grow in our service to Him.

I think we should also be encouraged. As we watch our beloved nation deteriorate spiritually—perhaps to depths we could not have envisioned even five years ago—know this again: You are not alone. There are thousands ... millions ... who share your convictions as well as your suspicions. They may do things just a little bit differently than you would prefer, but they face very similar struggles, and we'll all be sharing heaven together. In the meantime, we may be partaking of persecution together. I think it's time some of us learn to get along a little bit better. Together, we form the only force for good in this world that is still holding things in tow (see 2 Thess. 2:7).

Finally, I believe the findings of my journeys should inspire gratitude. Paul told the Philippians that he praised the Lord whenever "Christ is preached" (Phil. 1:18)—even if the preacher had an impure or arrogant heart.

I've been in a lot of different churches—including several different kinds of church bodies. I thank God for each one of them, and pray that they will succeed and remain steadfast in these darkening days. I'm honored to have the opportunity to serve alongside of them.

What is your view of God's work in the churches across our nation? I would love to hear your thoughts.

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