

'Christian Birthright' attracts pro-Israel Christian students

Etgar Lefkovits, THE JERUSALEM POST

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A group of 19 Christian students from universities in the United States and Germany completed on Tuesday a three-week tour of Israel meant to forge deeper bonds between them and the Jewish state, and to educate them about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Israel Experience Program, dubbed the 'Christian Birthright,' is a Christian spin-off on the highly successful Taglit-birthright Israel program, which brings young Jews on free 10-day trips to Israel. The program, which is the vision of the prominent Evangelical Christian leader Robert Stearns and is carried out in coordination with the Foreign Ministry and the Knesset's Christian Allies Caucus, aims to teach participants the Jewish roots of Christianity, and offers them brief introductory courses covering the Holocaust, Zionism, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the agenda of radical Islam.

The trip is sponsored by the New York-based Eagles' Wings Ministry, and its itinerary included a visit to the Knesset, meetings with MKs and Foreign Ministry officials and touring key religious sites.

The program exemplifies the changing face of Christian tourism and offers participants an up-close view of the past mixed with the present, said program director Michael Onifer.

"We saw there was a need for educated articulate ambassadors on campuses to deal with anti-Semitic, anti-Western ideologies," Onifer said of the annual program, which debuted in 2004.

Opposing views on social issues between predominantly liberal American Jewish students and the Christian Right on American campuses, as well as ongoing Jewish concern over Christian proselytizing, have strained relations between the two groups for decades, particularly on politically charged Israel-related issues.

"On campus, you would see informed Jewish and Muslim students [about Israel] but it is rare to see informed Christian students on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," said program participant Josh Lawson, 21, who just graduated from UCLA.

Lawson's avid interest in Israel as the son of a pastor, led him to spend a semester at Hebrew University. He then went on to be elected as a honorary board member of the Jewish Student Union at UCLA.

Cooperation between Christian and Jewish students on Israel-related issues was virtually nonexistent until now, said Lawson. "When it comes to an issue such as Israel, you encounter a certain amount of resistance from the Jewish community in the States," he said.

"'Christian Zionism' may be a bad buzzword, but we need to see relationships built between Christian and Jewish supporters of Israel," said Angela Stadelman, 24, of Ohio.

Stadelman, a Roman Catholic who attended Franciscan University, took interest in Israel after concluding that mainstream US media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was not in sync with Judeo-Christian mores.

"I was not content with the metaphor of 'two children fighting,'" Stadelman said.

After spending three "unparalleled" weeks in Israel, both Lawson and Stadelman said that it was critical for supporters of Israel to unite.

"There is so little precedent for [cooperation among Israel supporters] that it takes a greater amount of initiative among those who are interested in making it possible," Lawson said, pledging to make every effort to do so when he pursues a Masters degree at George Washington University.

"We as Christians should support Israel by conviction of conscience," Stadelman said. "Standing with Israel is about [choosing between] right and wrong."



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