

A NEW THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE IN ISRAEL

Israel has a special place in the evangelical heart. It is the land of Jesus' earthly life, the setting for most biblical events, and the location of Christianity's mother church.

What is more often forgotten in the West is its continuous Christian heritage since the lifetime of Jesus. What Rome was to the Latin church, Jerusalem was to the Eastern Churches. These communities remained when the Jewish population disappeared, and went on to survive some fourteen centuries of Muslim rule over Palestine. Over the last century, evangelical missionaries have added to that community a spread of biblically faithful and spiritually vital churches.

These evangelicals are a **minority** (of about 5000), **within a minority** (of around 130,000 Arab Christians), **within a minority** (of about 1.3 million Arab Israelis alongside over 5 million Jewish Israelis). They are strongest in the Galilee and northern Arab towns. The largest evangelical group in all Israel is the Baptist community, with around twenty churches (not counting those in the Palestinian territories, which in law cannot be part of an Israeli organisation). The evangelicals have a hard time from everyone. By Jews, Arabs are assumed to be Muslims and maybe a danger. By

Muslims, Christian Arabs are increasingly disrespected. By traditional Christians, evangelicals are regarded as 'sheep stealers' even though most evangelical converts have no regular church involvement.

The evangelical Arab community has a tradition of choosing pastors from within the congregation. In general, such men are not trained, not theologically educated, and not able to draw a sufficient salary from the church to support their (already existing) families. The Association of Baptist Churches in Israel (ABC) decided to take action.

The result is the formation of the Nazareth Center for Christian Studies, opened in September this year. The College has a doctrinal foundation similar to the UCCF and FIEC. We will deliver a BD course devised and supervised by Spurgeons College in London, as well as an MTh under the supervision of the International Baptist Seminary in Prague. These colleges have generously provided for us to do all this at a much reduced rate of fees, and by using missionary staff the NCCS can avoid adding large running costs to the courses. The students will therefore attend lectures from 5pm-9pm four days a week, thus becoming 'full-time' students able to

achieve a degree in three or four years. At the same time, they will have flexibility to combine study with church work. It is by no means an easy challenge for them, but it offers a remarkable opportunity to gain effective training and education.

Alongside their theological studies, ministry students will pursue ministry formation. This will be my primary responsibility, while my wife, Angela, will be the College Bursar. I will be responsible for spiritual training, teaching church principles and practice, and training students as preachers, pastors and leaders. Those who go on into ministry will have a programme of further study and development to equip them for modern ministry in Israel. Our desire is to raise up first class leaders to pursue first class courses and become first class ministers of the gospel. At present, too many gifted young people feel obligated to their families to pursue high grade professions in order to escape poverty and discrimination. We want them, their families, and their churches to listen for God's call to ministry; and then provide them with a way forward that will bless them and bless their churches in the next generation. ■

Phil Hill

