



Usher Randy Conley of CC Palm Desert, CA, serves communion on Christmas Eve in the church's sanctuary—the bottom floor of a Southern California Jewish synagogue.



Two signs greet those who enter the parking lot. Photo by Jim Doub

## Church in a Synagogue

Since 2005, CC Palm Desert, CA, has met in a Jewish temple. The two congregations have built relationships, learned from each other, and enjoyed camaraderie despite their theological differences.

Story by Ellen Gaston and Debra Smith  
Photos by Mark Glassman, unless otherwise noted

*You, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them ...*

Romans 11:17b

“Frequent contact with Jewish people has made me realize the honor of being grafted into God’s people,” said Carolyn Doub of Calvary Chapel Palm Desert, CA. “I am so thankful for what Jesus did so I could be adopted as God’s child.”



The building's main entrance leads to the temple's *bimah*, or sanctuary; another entrance provides quicker access to the church's meeting area. Photo by Jim Doub

For five years, CC Palm Desert has met in a local Jewish temple, or synagogue. Carolyn's husband Jim, who serves the church in many ways though officially retired from his role as assistant pastor, said, “The Jewish people have been so generous and open. I feel like they have made us a part of their community.” The congregations' primary meeting days are different—the Jews on Saturday and the Christians on Sunday—but since the synagogue meets upstairs and the church downstairs, the groups have no difficulty gathering concurrently for mid-week or holiday services. Several times, the worshipers have joined each other for special occasion celebrations.

After Pastor Joe Coleman planted CC Palm Desert in 2004, the fellowship met for a year in a hotel. Then one day as a congregant drove by the temple, she felt that the Holy Spirit prompted her to realize the building was a potential meeting location. When she mentioned the idea to Joe, he was enthusiastic: Ever since coming to know Christ in 1982, he said, “God had given me a heart for Jewish people. As I studied God’s Word, the Lord showed me His own love for them.” After praying about the proposal, Joe visited the temple early one morning to inquire about renting space. The first person he met, the temple administrator, soon became a friend to Joe, his wife Tina, and several others at CC Palm Desert. “Later, she told me she knew from the moment I walked in that I loved the Jews,” Joe said.

The administrator promised to pass on Joe's request, and she called him that afternoon with a yes. Joe was not surprised by the quick, decisive response: “The Jewish people are very discerning,” he said. “They have been so persecuted over the years that they are able to detect those who love them.” Later the rabbi told Joe that Christians had helped his people start a synagogue in Michigan years prior, and he felt privileged to return the favor.

### Jesus through Jewish Eyes

Stephen Druskin, a Jew who came to trust Christ in adulthood, has been an elder at CC Palm Desert for three years. As a child, Stephen said, “I was always questioning things. I always wanted to know why. The beginning of Genesis 1:26, ‘Let Us,’ bothered me. That’s the Trinity, but I didn’t get it at the time.”

As a preteen, Stephen attended Hebrew school three days each week. There he learned Jewish customs, stories, and Scripture; but once grown, “I began living a hedonistic party life,” Stephen said. “I was quite depressed.” In his 30s, Stephen became a salesman for a trucking company. Stephen's manager soon visited from out of town to train him, and while waiting in his manager's hotel to go out on sales calls, Stephen picked up a Bible from the dresser. Without a bookmark or tab, Stephen randomly flipped the book open—and began reading at chapter one of the Gospel of John.

*“I started reading [the Gospel of John] and couldn’t put it down. Throughout the day, between sales calls, I peppered the man with questions about Jesus.”*

Messianic Jew Stephen Druskin



Tina Coleman, center, wife of Pastor Joe, and their daughter Kelli Thrower gather with others to celebrate Christ’s birth.



As the Christmas Eve service concludes, usher Luther Green, left, and Joe prepare to pass candlelight representing Jesus’ birth around the room, person to person.

At Christmas Eve service 2009, believers hold candles representing Jesus, the Light of the world, as Pastor Joe Coleman proclaims His coming to banish the darkness and sin of the world.

“I started reading and couldn’t put it down,” Stephen remembered. “Throughout the day, between sales calls, I peppered the man with questions about Jesus. Over lunch, he asked if I’d like to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. I said yes.” It was November 1980.

As a new Christian, Stephen thought he no longer needed the Hebrew Scriptures, called by Jews *Torah* and by Christians *Old Testament*. But through the teaching of Pastor Chuck Smith at CC Costa Mesa, CA, Stephen soon changed his perspective:

The Old Testament is essential, he realized, because both Testaments work together to point to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of all who trust in Him. As Stephen came to see the two Testaments as forming a unity—the Old Testament by prophesying about Jesus before His coming, and the New Testament by explaining more about Jesus after His coming—he came to love the Scriptures he had grown up with. After Stephen and his wife moved to Palm Desert in 1999 and she injured her back in 2005, “I promised her I wouldn’t be more than a few minutes away

while she had to stay home,” remembered Stephen. “Then Calvary Chapel moved into the synagogue less than a mile down the street. God worked that out.”

**Growing and Pointing to Christ in the Desert**

Church secretary Sue MacKell has served at Calvary Chapel Palm Desert since it began. “Every summer we have grown,” Sue said. “Nothing in the desert grows in the summer. The snowbirds leave, tourists leave, and stores brace for a slump. But we grow.” The

temple allowed the church to renovate last year in order to provide space for 400 added chairs; six months later, the sanctuary was filling up again, and the fellowship began a second service. “There’s a standing joke between the former rabbi and me,” said Joe. “He’s astounded by the church’s growth—in the desert! I always reply, ‘We preach from your Book about your Messiah, and it’s just what happens.’”

On several occasions, the Jewish leaders have allowed CC Palm Desert to use the building’s main sanctuary, a room they call *bimah*. Ironically, remarked Joe, this is a variant spelling of *bema*, the Greek word used for Christ’s judgment seat in 2 Corinthians 5:10. The setting means the believers are surrounded by Old Testament Scripture passages on the walls and by artifacts such as a hand-written Torah in a receptacle called an ark. Knowing this atmosphere, one Christmas Eve in the *bimah* Joe preached on the coming of the Messiah—prophesied in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the New. “To my surprise, both the rabbi and the temple administrator came,” said Joe. “They heard the real Christmas story about their own Messiah from their own Book.”

Once when Carolyn Doub was teaching the church’s 3- to 6-year-olds in a temple classroom, a child spotted an unusual-looking round object among the stuffed animals. “It was a stuffed Torah,” remembered Carolyn. “The kids were curious, so we all sat down to learn about it.” Carolyn explained how God gave His Word, the Torah, to the Jewish people through Moses after He delivered them from slavery in Egypt. Ultimately, she said, the book of God’s Word points to His supreme Word of revelation—Jesus—Who came for both the Jewish people and all others as well. ✎

***The LORD has made bare His holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.***

Isaiah 52:10

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