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*A Study of Messianic Congregations and Liturgy*  
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# A Study of Messianic Congregations and Liturgy

by Michael Schiffman, D.Min.

The meaning of liturgy, *Leitourgia*, is service. Its original usage in Biblical times was related less to worship, and more often than not, to acts of service, as in Phil. 2:25,30. It later came to refer to our worship, our "spiritual" service to the Lord. Every congregation that worships the Lord engages in one type of liturgy or another, be it traditional or non-traditional. Although there are many variables between and within groups in worship, the primary sign of corporate worship is the assembling of the people.

The following are the results of a study undertaken to examine variable factors of worship in Messianic congregations, and their impact upon the local congregation's evangelistic outreach. In executing this survey, I chose to poll those congregations which have been in existence for more than one year and had more than ten members, be they Jewish or Gentile. My reason for setting this survey criteria was that I wanted to measure factors in those congregations which are substantially developed and are truly representative of the Messianic movement. Those congregations which have been in existence for less than one year would not have enough of a track record for a study to be able to glean meaningful results for the purposes of this survey. Those with less than ten members are too small to be considered a congregation for the purpose of this study. In this survey, I sought to measure those practices, factors, and events which are typical in Messianic congregations. The data from this survey should be of assistance to those congregations which are seeking to become established.

This survey was conducted during the MJAA Messiah '87 Conference in Grantham, Pennsylvania in July 1987, and during the UMJC Conference in Atlanta, Georgia in August 1987, and administered by mail to members of the FMC during September 1987.

The procedure followed was to approach each congregational leader personally, requesting them to fill out the questionnaire. Most were willing to comply. Several leaders expressed their desire to help but disliked filling out questionnaires, especially one this long. Most questionnaires were received before the end of each conference. Several were returned by mail. In September questionnaires were mailed to each FMC congregation and were returned promptly.

After tabulating the survey results, a copy of the results was returned to each leader with a self-addressed, stamped envelope and a post test requesting they respond to the results of the survey and return their response. An analysis of the data follows.

## 1. Educational background of Spiritual Leader.

Undergraduate	28	[93%]
MDiv	14	[47%]
Masters	8	[27%]

Bible School	10	[33%]
Post Grad.	5	[17%]
no formal ed.	2	[ 7%]

These figures should be interpreted in light the age of the Messianic movement. 47% of Spiritual leaders polled have earned MDiv. degrees for a movement that is barely 20 years old, is as well or better than other movements when they have been at this stage of development. While education is not the foremost emphasis, it is valued and encouraged. The UMJC has a Yeshiva (Bible School) for pastoral Training. Recently the Messiah Yeshiva has been organized for basic to graduate studies in the Washington D.C. area. The MJAA recently began a training institute as well.

2. Spiritual Leader's religious upbringing.

A. Jewish

Orthodox	9	[30%]
Conservative	7	[23%]
Reform	4	[13%]
Secular	6	[20%]
Messianic	3	[10%]

B. Non Jewish

1 [ 3%]

Most Messianic leaders are from Jewish backgrounds of the more traditional type. The percentages are inverted with the Jewish community which has Reform/secular as the largest group, and Orthodox as the smallest. It could be that the Orthodox/Conservative emphasis on God in their upbringing may have contributed to these leaders becoming believers. It is also interesting that ten percent of the Messianic leaders polled come from a Messianic background. Ten percent of Messianic congregations were pre-1970, which would indicate that leadership represented here came out of the early congregations.

3. Spiritual Leader's theological orientation.

Charismatic	23	[77%]
non-Charismatic	5	[17%]
Dispensational	8	[27%]
Covenant	2	[ 7%]
Promise	7	[23%]
Pre-Trib	13	[43%]
Mid Trib	1	[ 3%]
Post-Trib	2	[ 7%]
Pre-Millennial	17	[57%]

4. Is congregation sympathetic to Spiritual Leader's theological position?

Fully	26	[87%]
Partially	4	[13%]

This should be compared with the first part of question 19.

19. Part played by the following in the worship services

Exercise of Spiritual Gifts

Major	5	[17%]
Minor	18	[60%]
None	7	[23%]

Although 77% of spiritual leaders label themselves charismatic in orientation, only 17% of them consider the exercise of spiritual gifts a major part of their services. 60% consider it minor. This suggests that while the leaders want to identify with God's gifts, power, and blessing, their praxis is for the most part minor and in some cases non-existent on the charismatic issue; what might be termed, mildly charismatic. This with the results of question 3 reflect the charismatic issue is a grey area in many Messianic congregations, as opposed to so many non-Jewish congregations which are cut and dry charismatic or non-charismatic. One reason for this may be that these congregations see themselves as first and foremost Messianic, and not charismatic or non-charismatic. Another possible reason for the variety of views in the congregations may be that most congregational members have "come out" of the dispersion of various denominations bringing with them the views they held in those churches. One possible reason some of the less charismatically oriented congregations may label themselves charismatic is because the term implies an openness to the power and sovereignty of God to whatever He may want. Many reject the more unconventional expressions associated with some Charismatic practices, yet they don't want to be labeled as closed to G-d's power.

5. S.L.'s primary preaching style

Expositional	24	[80%]
Bible Study	4	[13%]
Follow prescribed texts		
{i.e., Torah, Haftarah readings}	4	[13%]
Topical-textual	16	[53%]

It would appear that most congregational leaders preach expositionally, overlapping with topical messages. This emphasis may be reflective of Jewish believers coming to the Lord because of the testimony of scripture, and not because it was something they grew up with, (excepting those from Messianic backgrounds). The Word of God is primary in Messianic congregations, because it, and not tradition or upbringing, is the basis of the Messianic faith in Yeshua.

6. Leadership positions held by Women in the congregation

Pastor	0	[0%]
Worship leader	4	[13%]
Elder	2	[7%]

Shammes (deacon)	11	[37%]
Trustee	2	[ 7%]

None of the Messianic congregations have women in a pastoral role, but many allow women in other leadership positions. Of the two congregations that had women in eldership positions, one is affiliated with Presbyterian Church-USA and the other with the Assemblies of God both of which follow the practice of having female elders. Another congregation did not have single women elders but followed the practice of having elder couples where both husband and wife had to meet the criteria for eldership and minister as a team. The most common area of leadership open to women in the Messianic congregations is shammes, which is more service oriented and less of a position of authority.

## Congregational Members

### 7. Percentage of membership from a Jewish background

1-25%	1	[ 3%]
26-50%	11	[37%]
51-75%	17	[57%]
76-100%	1	[ 3%]

Most Messianic congregations in this survey have memberships of Jewish people between 25%-75%. This illustrates that Messianic congregations are not putting up a "middle wall of partition" between Jewish and non-Jewish people, since both are equally members of these congregations. The respondents indicated that there is no second class citizenship in their congregations for non-Jewish members. All members are equally able to serve, hold congregational office, as well as to be ministered to with no partiality.

### 8. Percentage of marriages involve intermarriage

1-25%	6	[20%]
26-50%	10	[33%]
51-75%	10	[33%]
76-100%	3	[10%]

As in membership the majority of congregations have between 25%-75% intermarriage. This may indicate two things: First, that Messianic congregations provide an ideal situation for an intermarried couple because of the Jewish cultural emphasis as well as New Testament faith. One large problem of intermarried couples is their lack of comfort in traditional churches or synagogues. More often than not, these couples either try to syncretize themselves religiously, bouncing between two religions, or they go their separate ways religiously, or they go no where. The problem becomes particularly difficult when they have to decide how they will raise their children. Messianic Congregations provide a most workable alternative to such couples. Subsequently, the second indication is that because of this dual emphasis, Messianic congregations are in

a strong position to reach out to unbelieving intermarried, and potentially intermarried couples, and should be involved in such outreach.

9. Average attendance at main weekly worship service

10-25	4 [13%]
26-50	11 [37%]
51-75	6 [20%]
76-100	3 [10%]
101-150	3 [10%]
151-250	2 [ 7%]
250+	1 [ 3%]

The size of the average Messianic congregation is between 25-75 people. While it should be noted that three larger Messianic congregations declined to participate in the survey, the bulk of the congregations are still in this 25-75 size category. This median size may be affected by the age of the currently emerging Messianic movement, but also points to the absence of many Jewish believers who are still in traditional churches. This movement is still in a pioneering stage, and as Jews in Israel long for those in the dispersion to return home, so do Messianic Jews look to Jewish believers in churches to "make aliyah," to return to the Messianic congregations.

10. Number of weekly services

1	15 [50%]
2	14 [47%]
3	1 [ 3%]

11. Day of main worship service

Friday	16 [53%]
Saturday	13 [43%]
Sunday	12* [40%]

\*note: 11 of the 12  
sunday congregations  
meet on fridays as  
well.

The bulk of these services were on Friday evenings or Saturday mornings. Most had Friday-Saturday, or Friday-Sunday services. Only one had Friday, Saturday, Sunday services, but they have since discontinued the Saturday morning services. Most of these congregations had Friday-Saturday as their main service. Four congregations listed Sunday as their main worship service. The reason for this Friday-Saturday emphasis instead of Sunday as primary may be for two reasons: First, Friday-Saturday is a traditional Jewish day of worship. It is honoring the Shabbat, and He who is Lord of Shabbat. A second reason may be that 40% of Messianic congregations\* (see question 24), meet in church buildings whose own congregations need their buildings on Sundays.

12. Congregations with special services for Jewish holidays

Rosh Hashanah	30 [100%]
Yom Kippur	30 [100%]

Passover	30	[100%]
Chanukah	29	[97%]
Purim	29	[97%]
Sukkot	28	[93%]
Shavout	23	[76%]
Simchat Torah	20	[67%]
Israel Independence day	11	[37%]
Yom HaShoah	10	[33%]
T'shib'Av	5	[17%]
Lag'b'omer	1	[3%]

#### Others

two congregations celebrate first fruits  
one celebrates shemonei Esrei

Most Messianic congregations celebrate the main holidays celebrated by most Jewish people, with the relatively minor holidays being shown less attention. This may be for two reasons: First, Messianic Jews celebrate Jewish holidays to show forth the Messiah in them, and those not celebrated may not carry any dominant Messianic themes. Secondly, these holidays are celebrated as a point of cultural identification and if they are not strongly emphasized by the Jewish community, the Messianic community may not be motivated to celebrate them either. An exception to this would be the innovation by some messianic congregations to celebrate first fruits, a biblical holiday, not celebrated by the Jewish community at large.

#### 13. Congregations that observe these holidays:

Yeshua's Birth	14 [47%]	* 2 in conjunction w/sukkot
Yeshua's Resurrection	20 [67%]	*5 in conjunction with first fruits

There is a hesitancy among some Messianic congregations to celebrate the Lord's birth and resurrection in their traditional Christian settings. One reason may be that they are viewed as non-Jewish. It could be argued that since the Messiah is Jewish, we being Messianic should not refrain from celebrating those holidays which commemorate the Messiah. But those Messianic congregations not celebrating these holy days may refrain from them as a matter of cultural sensitivity to the Jewish people. Christmas and Easter represent very difficult times of the year for Jewish people, because at no other times are Jewish people more aware of their being different from the general populous. It can be traumatic for Jewish children not participating in elaborate holiday festivities gentile children celebrate because of Jewishness. It can be harder on their parents knowing they must deny their children from participating in an obviously enjoyable festivity.

Another possible reason some Messianic congregations do not celebrate these

holidays is the commercialism that accompanies both Christmas and Easter. It is for this reason that a small percentage of Messianic congregations have begun to celebrate Messiah's birth and resurrection in conjunction with existing Jewish holidays. Sukkot, (tabernacles), the feast of booths is a reminder of the wilderness wanderings, that when the people wandered throughout the wilderness, God was indeed with them. Zechariah 14 teaches that the Lord will come and reign from Jerusalem, and the world will come year after year to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. Tabernacles is associated, by these congregations with God dwelling among us. John 1:14 says and the Word became flesh and **dwelt** among us.

Other congregations celebrate Yeshua's birth on Kislev 25th, or Chanukah, because it is the festival of lights, and Yeshua, the light of the world has come. In addition, Chanukah, being the festival of dedication is a reminder that God calls us to rededicate ourselves to Him.

Yeshua's resurrection is commemorated by some congregations in conjunction with *Bikkurim*, First Fruits, because Yeshua is the first fruits of the resurrection.

14. Elements of Jewish tradition and liturgy in the worship service.

Kipah	24	[80%]
Kiddush	24	[80%]
Talit	21	[70%]
Traditional prayers	21	[70%]
Shabbat Candles	20	[67%]
T'fillin	4	[13%]

Among the elements of Jewish tradition used in Messianic congregations, the Kipah (head covering) and Kiddush (blessing over the wine and bread) are the most common, followed by the usage of some traditional prayers and the wearing of Talit (prayer shawl). I would assume the kindling of shabbat candles would have been higher if more congregations worshipped on Friday evenings, when they are normally lit. If the percentage of those kindling Shabbat candles is compared with those having Friday services, it is clear that all Friday evening congregations kindle the candles. Several Saturday morning congregations noted that they light candles at home on Friday evenings.

Laying t'fillin is mostly practiced by Orthodox Jews and certainly not by many Messianic congregations.

15. What percentage of your male congregants wear

Kipah		
all	0	
most	11	[37%]
some	14	[47%]



Talit	none	5	[17%]
	all	0	
	most	2	[7%]
	some	18	[60%]
T'fillin	none	10	[33%]
	all	0	
	most	0	
	some	5	[17%]
	none	25	[83%]

16. Congregations that supply Kipot & Talit

Kipah	17	[57%]
Talit	4	[14%]

17. Percentage of the male leadership wearing Kipah

	all	10	[33%]
	most	10	[33%]
	some	4	[14%]
	none	6	[20%]
Talit			
	all	3	[10%]
	most	7	[23%]
	some	11	[37%]
	none	9	[30%]
T'fillin			
	all	0	
	most	0	
	some	4	[14%]
	none	26	[77%]

These figures suggest that the kipah is the most commonly used religious article worn in the congregations, followed by the Talit. T'fillin is worn by only a very few.

18. Congregations with a Torah	10	[33%]
used in services		
Frequently	7	[23%] [70%]
Occasionally	3	[10%] [30%]
Seldom		
Never		

One third of Messianic congregations have Torahs. One reason the other two

thirds do not may be the high cost of purchasing a Torah. Among those congregations that have a Torah, there is a higher percentage of those who wear Kipah and Talit. Those congregations also use the Torah either occasionally or frequently. Having a more traditional Torah service may account for a more traditional use of kipah, talit, and liturgy.

19. Part played by the following in the worship services

Exercise of Spiritual Gifts

Major	5	[17%]
Minor	18	[60%]
None	7	[23%]

Traditional Liturgy

Major	8	[27%]
Minor	19	[63%]
None	3	[10%]

Proclamation of the Word

Major	27	[90%]
Minor	3	[10%]
None	0	[0]

Music

Major	27	[90%]
Minor	2	[7%]
None	0	[0]

Other aspects of the worship listed were sharing, testimonies, prayer, fellowship, and children's time.

From this data, clearly, the major emphases in Messianic worship are Word proclamation and Music. Of subordinate emphasis are liturgy and exercise of charismatic spiritual gifts. This would suggest that the average Messianic congregation is a Word-oriented congregation with a strong musical emphasis in music. Spiritual gifts and liturgicalelements are part of the service, but neither are of central emphasis or of primary impact. None of the more liturgically oriented congregations consider themselves "under the Law," but rather under grace and seek to utilize their own traditional forms to teach Biblical truth in a manner consistant with Jewish heritage.

20: Type of building in which congregation meets:

home	1	[3%]
church	12	[40%]
facility leased full-time	4	[13%]
facility leased part-time	2	[7%]
school	3	[10%]

own building	7	[23%]
lodge	1	[3%]

The single most common facility in which Messianic congregations worship is a church building. Sixty percent of congregations meet elsewhere. Of the six larger congregations, two meet in schools (one is in the process of building their own facility), two meet in churches, one has its own building, and one leases a facility full time. Church buildings often can be used at a less expensive cost to the Messianic congregation, especially if the church is sympathetic to the cause of the Messianic movement. The draw backs involved in using a church building are in scheduling of services (i.e., Sundays are not practical), and in the problem of the Messianic congregation being too closely identified with the ministry of that church, which is counter-productive in its witness to the Jewish community and in the congregation's own self identity.

21. Congregations with a Hebrew/Shabbat School

	22	[73%]
grades		
Nursery:	20	[67%]
3-6:	20	[67%]
7-10:	16	[53%]
11-13:	12	[40%]
13-adult	7	[23%]

Messianic groups have been developing their own educational curricula for their education departments. Until recently, they have had to adapt materials from outside the movement. As the materials increase in various age groups, so too will there be Shabbat school classes beyond these groups.

22. Congregations affiliated with a denomination outside the Messianic movement:

	7	[23%]
1 Evangelical Free Church		
1 North American Baptist		
3 PCUSA		
2 A/G		

23. Congregations affiliated with Messianic groups:

UMJC	19	[63%]	note: several congregations are affiliated in more than one organization.
FMC	6	[20%]	
IAMCS	9	[30%]	

Most Messianic congregations are not affiliated with outside denominations, those who are, have either been planted by those denominations or in some way financially helped by them. Almost all the Messianic congregations belong to at least one of the three Messianic congregational organizations, with some belonging to more than one. Of

the three organizations, one is oriented towards non-charismatic congregations, while the other two seek to be broad umbrella organizations. Among the reasons for being part of these organizations, is the need for fellowship of those in a similar ministry and vision, as well as the ability to enable the movement to have a greater impact, speaking with a combined voice to issues affecting those in Messianic congregations.

24. Congregations that take up offerings in worship services:

13 [43%]

Congregations that use a Tsadakah box for giving:

17 [57%]

## NEIGHBORHOOD

25. Percentage of congregation's neighborhood is Jewish:

mostly 9 [30%]

partly 19 [63%]

not at all 2 [7%]

26. Jewish community in which congregation is primarily situated:

Orthodox 4 [13%]

Conservative 9 [30%]

Reformed 11 [37%]

Agnostic 1 [3%]

secular 5 [17%]

27. Spiritual Leader's perception of the Jewish community's reaction to the congregation's presence:

indifferent 16 [53%]

unaware of it's existence 1 [3%]

part of community

antagonism 12 [40%]

open hostility 1 [3%]

other

Most Messianic congregations are located in areas that are partly Jewish, as opposed to being located in the center of a Jewish neighborhood. One reason for this may be the changing demographics of Jewish communities, where people no longer live in areas that are all one ethnic type or another. Most of the Jewish communities are either conservative or reformed, again reflecting the demographics of the average Jewish community.

The Spiritual leaders perceptions of Jewish reaction to the Messianic congregation is mostly either Indifferent or openly hostile. Some of the spiritual leaders commented that the average Jewish person was indifferent, and curious, while the leaders of the

community and anti-missionaries stir up hostility toward Messianic congregations.

## VISITORS

28. Number of visitors congregation has in an average month:

1-4	2	[7%]
5-10	12	[40%]
11-20	11	[37%]
over 20	5	[17%]

29. Number of visitors who are Jewish:

1-4	18	[60%]
5-10	12	[40%]
11-20		
over 20		

30. Number of visitors who return:

1-4	24	[80%]
5-10	6	[20%]
11-20		
over 20		

Most congregations have between 5-20 visitors per month. Of these, on the average, at least one and as many as ten may be Jewish. 80% of the congregations have 1-4 visitors return, and 20% have as many as ten return. This indicates that the Messianic congregations are attracting people to their congregations, both Jewish and non-Jewish, some visitors are returning. This indicates a healthy potential for growth.

31. The congregation's perception of itself in effectively reaching the unsaved relatives of it's members:

mostly	2	[7%]
somewhat	14	[47%]
slightly	11	[37%]
not effective	3	[10%]

The congregations see themselves as somewhat effective in reaching the unsaved relatives of it's members. This may be because Messianic congregations are able to communicate that Jewish identity is sustained when a Jewish person believes in Yeshua.

## OUTREACH

32. Activities of the congregation toward outreach into the community:

Holiday celebrations	22	[73%]
Friendships	20	[67%]

Literature distribution	15	[50%]
Advertising	15	[50%]
Special activities	15	[50%]
Musical presentations	13	[43%]
other outreach activities include:		

Door to door; Evangelism Explosion; Coffee Houses; Campus outreach; dance ministry, nursing home ministry, homeless outreach.

33. Activities that have been the most successful in making new contacts, and in sharing their faith:

Friendships	16	[53%]
Holiday celebrations	13	[43%]
Special activities	9	[30%]
Advertising	6	[20%]
Musical presentations	6	[20%]
Literature distribution	2	[7%]

34. Outreach methods which the congregation is most comfortable with:

Friendships	17	[57%]
Holiday celebrations	16	[53%]
Special activities	9	[30%]
Advertising	8	[27%]
Musical presentations	6	[20%]
Literature distribution	1	[3%]

While Messianic congregations utilize a plethora of methods for outreach, clearly friendship evangelism and holiday celebrations are most effective methods of outreach. This suggests that holiday celebrations should be more geared to evangelism and people should be bolder in stepping out in sharing the Messiah with their friends.

35. Average attendance in Main worship services

	<u>20-30</u>	<u>31-45</u>	<u>46-65</u>	<u>66-100</u>	<u>100-200</u>	<u>200+</u>	
1987	7		6	7	5	3	1
1986	7		8	5	6	2	1
1985	12		6	3	3	3	
1984	12		5	3	2	3	

Most congregations indicated growth over the past four years, with the exception of one who changed their worship day, and another which had endured a costly split.

36. Factors attributed to growth of congregations by their leaders:

Evangelism, publicity, worship style, move to larger facility, the Lord, Word being Proclaimed, Word of mouth, prayer, planning for growth, opportunities for service, unity, grace.

One congregation indicated a decline as the result of moving worship from Sunday to Saturday.

37. Number of people who have left the congregation in the past year:

1-5	11	[37%]
6-10	8	[27%]
11-15	5	[17%]
16-20		
20+	1	[3%]

Perceived reasons for their leaving:

move out of area  
disagree with Messianic Vision  
charismatic emphasis  
non charismatic emphasis  
Distance to travel  
backsliding  
death

These reasons suggest that being either charismatic or non-charismatic will make little difference in people leaving a congregation, as there are always people who will leave because they differ no matter what side a congregation falls on. One factor that stands out is the people who left because they did not have a Messianic vision. This indicates that the vision should be taught more clearly to those enquiring about the congregation, and those in the congregation should be reminded of it more frequently, so they know why they are there, and what are the congregation's prime goals.

38. Leader's perception of congregation

growing	23	[77%]
at a plateau	5	[17%]
shrinking	2	[7%]

Most congregations are perceived as growing, expressing an optimism about the movement and what God is doing in bringing His people to redemption. Some perceive themselves as at a plateau. This may be because growth is slow in a Messianic congregation, owing to its specialized ministry. Those who perceived their congregations as shrinking had done so because of recent splits or internal problems.

39. Kind of music ministry of congregation:

Singing	27	[90%]
Musical Instruments	26	[87%]
Dance	9	[30%]

Most congregations music ministry is limited to singing and various instruments, while some have dance ministries. In light of the importance of the music ministry, it would make sense for them to build their music ministries as best they can.

40. Activities of the congregation to foster the fellowship and social life of the congregation:

Worship services	24	[80%]
Social gatherings	26	[87%]
Outings	17	[57%]
Special projects	14	[47%]

Other activities indicated include, ladies bible studies, Prayer Meeting, Bagel Breakfast, Growth Groups, Pot Luck, Bible studies, Home Groups.

Messianic Congregations have a variety of variable factors within their formal and informal worship, through which they can communicate the good news of Yeshua to our people. The results of the study point to utilization of the worship on Holidays to reach out. The real value of our liturgy seems to be seated not so much in the area of evangelism as it is in communicating our faith to our children in a Jewish form, and therewithin providing a link with both our ancestors and our descendants.

## Summary

The average Messianic congregation is between 25-75 people comprised of both Jewish and non-Jewish people. Their primary worship forms are the preaching of the Word and Music. Of possible secondary factors are either traditional forms and liturgy, and Charismatic emphasis. Most have some traditional emphasis, and some do care to be counted as "charismatic," although they may or may not have an emphasis of spiritual gifts in their worship services, but simply want to be counted as being open to God's workings. They celebrate Jewish holy days as part of their worship, and find in them a significant opportunity to reach out to Jewish people.