1. Funding Avodat Yisrael (“a Messianic Jewish Community”)

A decision was made at the 216th Presbyterian General Assembly in 2004 to continue to support Avodat Yisrael (by a 260-223 vote), where:

a. “Avodat Yisrael blends the teachings and practices of the ancient Messianic Jewish community with modern community developments.”

b. “Worship is structured around Jewish traditions, prayer and holidays.”

http://www.pcusa.org/interfaith/study/perspective.htm
Perspective on a Presbyterian "Messianic" New Church Development in Philadelphia

In March, 2003, a new Presbyterian congregation began its ministry in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Its name is Avodat Yisrael, and it wants to be known as a "Messianic" congregation (a congregation inviting those of Jewish background to explore Christian faith while maintaining Jewish religious and cultural practices) within the Presbyterian family. When the church held its first worship services on Rosh ha-Shannah in September, 2003, it quickly raised serious concerns within the Jewish community and elsewhere, and garnered local and national media attention.

This brief paper is an attempt to offer an account of Presbyterian involvement in this project, and to answer some of the questions that have been raised.

For Presbyterians this is not a simple or straightforward issue. A number of important points need to be made, which can be briefly stated as follows:

1. Along with 40 or more years of involvement in building positive interfaith and Christian-Jewish relations, there is a history of Presbyterian support for evangelism among Jews that laid the groundwork for developing this new church.

2. The process leading to the funding of this congregation was thorough and based on specific conditions, and was contested.

3. Careful oversight and review of this ministry are being provided.
4. A number of serious issues raised to a new level of attention by this new church development require the attention of the PC(USA).

5. The affirmations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in regard to evangelism and to Christian-Jewish relations remain unchanged.

1. Along with 40 or more years of involvement in building positive interfaith and Christian-Jewish relations, there is a history of Presbyterian support for evangelism among Jews that laid the groundwork for developing this new church. Many people, including many Presbyterians, were surprised to hear about a new Presbyterian "Messianic" church. Since at least the mid-1960's, Presbyterians have worked with Jews and people of other faiths on issues of social and civic concern. They have, in particular, engaged in serious theological discussions with Jews and among themselves, leading to the 1987 General Assembly theological statement, "A Theological Understanding of the Relationship Between Christians and Jews, which was commended to the church for study and action. This Paper affirmed that the church has been "engrafted into the people of God established by the covenant with Abraham," and that both church and Jewish people are "elected by God for witness to the world." However, since at least the 1930's some Presbyterians have been part of a network to support the growth of "Hebrew Christian" or "Messianic" churches. Such networks are common, if not well known, within so-called "main-line" churches. Messiah Now Ministries (formerly known as the Christian Approach to the Jews), which is a partner in launching this new church development, has been promoting Presbyterian mission with Jewish people in the Philadelphia area since the 1920's. Rev. Andrew Sparks, the organizing pastor of Avodat Yisrael, was ordained to this ministry by the Presbytery of Philadelphia. Many Presbyterian congregations and individuals support such efforts out of their general concern that the gospel be made known to all people, and/or out of a more specific interest in Christian ministry among Jews. Supporters of this kind of mission do not necessarily agree on the model that should be employed in such outreach efforts.

2. The process leading to the funding of this congregation was thorough and based on specific conditions, and was contested. Each step of the long review process for approval and funding of this project was carried out carefully. The New Church Development Committee of the Presbytery of Philadelphia explored a number of concerns with Rev. Sparks, and satisfied of the intent of the project, recommended its approval to the Presbytery. There the proposal was debated and approved in February, 2002. Pastors and others within the Presbytery brought motions to rescind this approval, but these motions to rescind did not carry. Approval was given based on assurances that this was not to be a ministry of proselytizing, but of providing a "non-coercive [congregational] context in which unaffiliated Jews and intermarried couples might explore a messianic faith." The vision is to provide a congregation "that would allow Jewish people to maintain their cultural identity while believing in Jesus" (Statements from review by Presbytery Committee, and from proposal). After Philadelphia Presbytery approved the project, it was also reviewed and approved by the Synod of the Trinity (the regional governing body), and then sent to the Mission Development Resources Committee of the General Assembly (the national governing body) of the Church. This Committee and its staff thoroughly reviewed the proposal, and raised a number of concerns regarding the style, tactics and "posture" of outreach to the intended audience; the oversight of the project; its budget; and staff position descriptions. Satisfied by the responses to these concerns, the Mission Development Resources Committee approved a program grant to Avodat Yisrael for 2003.
3. Careful oversight and review of this ministry are being provided. The Presbytery of Philadelphia has been working with this new church development to shape an outreach and evangelism strategy that is consistent with Reformed theology and Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) policy. An Administrative Commission is being appointed to oversee the work of Avodat Yisrael. The mandate of this Commission is to work with the pastor and congregation on an ongoing basis, to review the governance and worship of the church and its compliance with the Presbyterian Book of Order, and to assure that this congregation faithfully and openly represents the Reformed theological tradition. One condition of the Presbytery, for example, is that the church clearly identify itself, in its signage and advertising, and on its web-site, as a congregation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). This oversight committee will be involved in the annual review of the project, upon which continuing funding by the PC(USA) depends.

4. A number of serious issues raised to a new level of attention by this new church development require the attention of the PC(USA). Clearly, the events in Philadelphia have raised questions among those outside the church regarding the policies of the Presbyterian Church in regard to Christian-Jewish relations and evangelization of the Jews. Those within the church are asking for discussion of the policies of mission the church can and will support. Another issue has to do with whether and how Presbyterians should relate to organizations dedicated to evangelism of the Jews. This messianic model also raises very complex questions regarding whether a person can be affiliated to two religions, and whether Jewishness can be treated as an ethnicity. Theological questions about the nature and acceptable scope of Christian witness are not new questions for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), but here are raised in a pointed way which gives renewed immediacy to the efforts underway to assist the denomination in these discussions. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) welcomes this opportunity to hear from colleagues and concerned individuals regarding other issues that come out of the founding of this congregation that need consideration by the church.

5. The affirmations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in regard to evangelism and to Christian-Jewish relations remain unchanged. The fact that the PC(USA) has given support to a messianic new church development does not change the commitments of the church, either to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the whole world, or to build positive and respectful relations between Presbyterians and Jews. In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) all of the following statements provide guidance for the behavior of believers:

"The Spirit gives us courage to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of people long silenced, and to work with others for justice."

(Brief Statement of Faith of the PC(USA))

"God's intent is that there be a human community that enjoys God's presence, reflects God's image, demonstrates God's love, shares God's passion for justice, and cares for God's earth. The proclamation of the triune God's loving purpose for the world is a radical call for individuals and institutions to turn from idolatry, to acknowledge God's reign, and to serve the living and true God*.
"With other Christians we are called to make joyous witness to persons of other faiths in a spirit of respect, openness and honesty. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) affirms with ecumenical partners that the proclamation of the gospel includes an invitation to recognize and accept in personal decision the saving lordship of Christ*. Christians owe the message of God's salvation in Jesus Christ to every person and every people.

("Mission and Evangelism," an ecumenical document of the World Council of Churches, pars. 10, 41)

In calling people to faith in Christ we are not only offering personal salvation but also calling them to follow Jesus in service of God's reign.

("Message" of San Antonio, World Council of Churches, Section 1.26)

"As our Christian affirmation meets the faith of others, we are not called to respond in judgment but in awareness of the limitless, saving presence, power and grace of God. The spirit that is to inform our witness among people of other faiths presupposes our presence with them, sensitivity to their deepest faith commitments and experiences, willingness to be their servants for Christ's sake, affirmation of what God has done and is doing among them and love for them.

("Message" of San Antonio, World Council of Churches, Section 1.25)

"As Christians our faith demands that we seek to build loving relationships with persons of other faiths. Where possible we will work in solidarity with them in struggles for justice, freedom, peace, and human dignity."

(Turn to the Living God, 1991)

"Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord, and all people everywhere are called to place their faith, hope, and love in him. No one is saved by virtue of inherent goodness or admirable living, for "by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" [Ephesians 2:8].

No one is saved apart from God's gracious redemption in Jesus Christ. Yet we do not presume to limit the sovereign freedom of "God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" [1 Timothy 2:4].

Thus, we neither restrict the grace of God to those who profess explicit faith in Christ nor assume that all people are saved regardless of faith. Grace, love and communion belong to God, and are not ours to determine."

(Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ, 2002)

"We affirm that the reign of God is attested both by the continuing existence of the Jewish people and by the church's proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Hence, when speaking with Jews about matters of faith, we must always acknowledge that Jews are already in a
covenantal relationship with God*. Dialogue is the appropriate form of faithful conversation between Christians and Jews. Dialogue is not a cover for proselytism. Rather, as trust is established, not only questions and concerns can be shared but faith and commitments as well. Christians have no reason to be reluctant in sharing the good news of their faith with anyone. However, a militancy that seeks to impose one's own point of view on another is not only inappropriate but also counterproductive*. Dialogue, especially in light of our shared history, should be entered into with a spirit of humility and a commitment to reconciliation. Such dialogue can be a witness that seeks also to heal that which has been broken."

(A Theological Understanding of the Relationship Between Christians and Jews, 1987)
2. Divestment from Israel

http://www.monabaker.com/pMachine/more.php?id=A2171_0_1_0_M

Overturned in 2006
1 http://www.avodatyisrael.com/about.html.