

The Reform Movement has been at the forefront of efforts to address the needs of interfaith and conversionary families. The present study was conducted to understand how such families function as members of Reform congregations and how congregations welcome them. A team of researchers from the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University systematically selected and then visited six Reform congregations. Three of the congregations were located in the Northeast and three in the Southeast. Within each region, small, medium, and large congregations were visited.

At each synagogue, interviews were conducted with rabbis, staff, and congregants. All synagogue staff or congregational leaders, whose work relates to the participation and integration of interfaith and conversionary families, were included. In addition, focus groups were conducted at each synagogue with groups of in-married, conversionary, and interfaith couples. Archival data related to congregational programs and policy was also examined.

Site visits yielded rich data about the engagement of interfaith and conversionary families in synagogue life. Data revealed clear differences among the synagogues as well as common patterns. From the multiple perspectives of congregants, lay leaders, professional staff, and rabbis, six broad themes emerged:

### **1. Outreach efforts are changing as a result of changes in the larger social context.**

- Intermarriage is more acceptable and congregational membership has become more diverse since Outreach programs first began.
- Interfaith families find a warm welcome at all of the congregations in the study.
- Aside from Introduction to Judaism, Outreach programs are suffering in attendance, especially those specifically focused on issues of acceptance.
- At some congregations, Outreach is beginning to include new groups such as gay/lesbian and multiracial Jews.

### **2. Rabbis play multiple and pivotal roles in welcoming and integrating interfaith families.**

- The rabbi's concern and support for engaged interfaith couples is the critical factor in helping these couples to feel welcome in the synagogue, rather than the rabbi's specific policy toward conducting interfaith marriages.
- In most cases, the rabbi is seen as the final arbiter in decisions regarding the participation of non-Jews in rituals and services.
- Rabbis generally do not focus on establishing broad rules and policies, preferring to consider each situation individually.
- The rabbi is in a unique position to discuss conversion with members, but rabbis usually do not proactively open the discussion, perhaps out of respect for the personal nature of the decision to convert.

### **3. The successes and struggles of Outreach are intertwined with the successes and struggles of the overall congregation.**

- Attracting young adults to synagogue life is a problem that transcends issues surrounding interfaith families. As a result, young interfaith couples often do not receive exposure to institutional Jewish influences in the formative years of their family life.
- Although congregations succeed at helping interfaith families to feel welcome, they do less well at encouraging them to progress on their Jewish journey.

- Congregations struggle with the role of non-Jews in governance.
- Jews by choice and non-Jews often inspire Jews by birth to become more involved in living a Jewish life.

#### 4. Jewish education of children, a key point of contact between the interfaith family and the synagogue, brings opportunities for family growth and for conflict.

- Children's participation in pre-school, Hebrew school, and day school can jumpstart Jewish learning by non-Jewish and Jewish parents.
- Unresolved issues within the interfaith family regarding children's religious orientation are often played out in the Hebrew school.
- Rabbis and school staff play a critical role in resolving problems that may arise with children of interfaith families.
- Non-Jewish mothers are playing a growing role in creating Jewish homes and ensuring that children are raised with a Jewish identity.

#### 5. Decisions regarding Judaism tend to be more affective than intellectual, and are often motivated by relationships and social needs. Thus emotions and personal connections have a stronger effect on Jewish engagement and conversion than does Jewish learning.

- Non-Jews and Jews by choice may seek out individuals in the synagogue other than the rabbi to go to with questions and concerns. Often these informal mavens are members or staff with whom the non-Jew or Jew by choice can identify.
- Non-Jews find many pathways into synagogue involvement, including assisting with activities for children in the pre-school and helping to maintain the synagogue building.
- The more points of personal connection the interfaith family has with the congregation, the greater the likelihood that it will remain engaged with the congregation over time.
- The choice to live a Jewish life is embedded within personal relationships and social networks. Relationships are critically important in creating ties between the individual and the synagogue, and in providing role models, mentors, and peer support.
- The Jewish identity of Jews by choice evolves over time, but synagogues do not provide continuing mentoring after conversion.
- For many lay leaders, Outreach is a passion and a cause.

#### 6. Small congregations face unique challenges.

- In small congregations, non-Jews are more likely to get involved since there are few paid staff.
- Because non-Jews are more involved in running the congregation, difficulties arise in drawing boundaries regarding their participation in governance and ritual.
- Rabbis' tenure is shorter in smaller congregations, making it hard to maintain a consistent approach.

## Programmatic Implications

A number of programmatic implications emerge from these findings:

- Personal relationships are the basis of community, and congregations succeed at engaging interfaith families when they pay attention to building these relationships.
- The more points of contact there are between congregants and the synagogue, the more congregants will be engaged over time.
- Drawing young interfaith couples into congregational life provides avenues of Jewish influence in the formative years of their life as a family.
- Synagogue based pre-schools and Hebrew schools are a key point of contact with interfaith families and school staff need specific preparation to deal with the issues and needs presented by these families.
- Making interfaith families comfortable is only the first step in a process of guidance and support toward greater levels of Jewish involvement and observance.
- Even though there are many paths to conversion, becoming a Jew by choice is not the dominant inclination of non-Jewish congregants, so synagogue clergy and staff may need to provide more encouragement and direction.
- According to Jewish law, converts have the same status as Jews by birth. However, they do not always have the same needs. Conversion is the first, rather than the last step in creating a Jewish identity and this process may require more support, education, and guidance than is currently offered to new Jews.
- Outreach may be more effective when it is integrated into all aspects of synagogue life rather than being a separate set of programmatic offerings.
- By identifying and reaffirming their core values, congregations lay the groundwork for integrating interfaith families, and, at the same time, maintain the integrity of Reform ritual and practice.

The current study draws a detailed picture of the experiences of interfaith and conversionary families from a small set of Reform congregations. It has identified provocative programmatic and philosophical issues regarding the integration of these families and has raised an extensive set of questions for future exploration. Most importantly, it has laid the foundation for developing a knowledge base that can inform decisions about policy and practice within both individual congregations and the larger Reform Movement.



## Interfaith Families in Modern Jewish Life

The Jewish historian Simon Rawidowicz sagely noted: "He who studies Jewish history will readily discover that there was hardly a generation in the Diaspora period which did not consider itself the final link in Israel's chain" (Rawidowicz, 1974, p.210). The history of Jews in the United States is no exception. The turn of the 18th century saw the disappearance of the colonial Jews who originated the Jewish presence in North America, generating concerns about continuity. The end of the 19th century witnessed the decline of Jewish communal ties among German Jews, fewer than ten percent of whom affiliated with synagogues and barely one-third of whom provided basic Jewish education to their school-aged children (Lipset & Raab, 1995). In each of these cases, as barriers dissolved and continuity was threatened, there was concern and alarm. The current controversy over intermarriage (see, e.g., Wertheimer, 2001; also, Musleah, 2001) can be viewed in this context as a new episode of an ongoing tale.

At the end of the 20th century, we saw interfaith and conversionary families becoming a growing segment of Jewish community life. Consistent with historical trends, their increasing visibility and numbers have generated both debate and calls to action (Tobin, 1999; Wertheimer, 2001). The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) indicated that 57 percent of Jews had married non-Jewish spouses in the previous five years (Goldstein, 1993). Accounting for the conversion of some non-Jewish partners, this figure was reduced to 52 percent, a number that sent waves of concern through the Jewish community. Perhaps the most disquieting information gleaned from the NJPS data was that a majority of children in the Jewish community were being raised in households that were not completely Jewish, and that among this group only one-third were being raised as Jews (Kosmin & Keysar, 1992). Using a cohort from the NJPS sample, Phillips (1998) described only 14 percent of the families as Judaic, a designation he gave to families in which the predominant religious observance was Jewish.

The most recent Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion by the American Jewish Committee (2000) further documents this trend. Although 85 percent of those interviewed were married to a Jewish spouse, 64 percent of their married children had a spouse who was not Jewish. The number of intermarriages notwithstanding, the American Jewish Committee's survey also suggests that acceptance of interfaith marriage is growing. Nearly 80 percent of their respondents indicate that intermarriage is an inevitable part of living in an open society. In a recent study of Jewish adolescents, Saxe, Kelner, Kadushin and Brodsky (2000) reported that although most of the teens interviewed did not believe it was important to marry a Jew, they nonetheless felt a commitment to raise their children within a Jewish home. An in-depth study of interfaith or "mixed" marriages (Fishman, 2001) suggested that even in those families where a decision had been made to have a Jewish household, there is a tendency, over time, toward more Christian observance within the home. The picture that emerges is of a Jewish community, bound less and less by endogamy, struggling to preserve and continue Jewish ethnic and religious traditions. It would seem that history is repeating itself yet again.

The Reform Movement, the largest stream of Judaism according to the NJPS, has been at the forefront of efforts to address the needs of interfaith and conversionary families. The last twenty years have witnessed rapid growth in Outreach programming targeted to these households and substantial debate has focused on how interfaith families should be treated by synagogues. Based on the concept of *keruv* ("drawing near the stranger"), the movement's prevailing approach has been to create a welcoming and supportive environment for interfaith and conversionary families and at the same time to maintain the integrity of Reform ritual and practice. In the words of the Union of

American Hebrew Congregations (1999), "The goal of Reform Jewish Outreach is to welcome interfaith couples and individuals considering conversion into Reform congregations, to create opportunities for Jewish learning, and to encourage Jewish choices in one's personal and family life."

From a congregational perspective, however, welcoming interfaith couples can bring a degree of tension (Tobin and Simon, 1999). Welcoming the needs and issues of these families can sometimes be in conflict with Reform standards and ideals and, as the numbers of families have increased, it is not clear how their involvement has affected synagogue life. Even though interfaith families are encouraged to become engaged in Jewish congregational life, there is only anecdotal information about their experiences within synagogues. Perhaps more importantly, we do not have a systematic understanding of what successes congregations are having and what problems they face in facilitating the progress of interfaith couples toward the creation of a Jewish home and a Jewish life.

The little research that we do have raises concerns. For example, Forster and Tabachnick (1991) found that almost one third of non-Jews considering conversion perceived the Jewish community as having negative attitudes toward converts. These prospective converts also felt that it would be difficult, as Jews by choice, to become fully part of the Jewish community.

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## Goals of the Present Study

The current study was designed to examine systematically how interfaith and conversionary families function as members of Reform congregations and what their impact has been on these synagogues. The goal is to better understand those elements of congregational life that may have an impact on the comfort, integration, and participation of these families and to answer the following questions:

- To what extent do individuals from interfaith and conversionary households experience acceptance within congregations?
- What attitudes, practices, and programs facilitate a path of increasing involvement and sense of community?
- What roles do synagogue professionals and lay leaders play in welcoming individuals from interfaith and conversionary families?
- What has been the impact of a growing interfaith population on the synagogue?

The report is based on qualitative data obtained from six Reform Jewish congregations that were studied in the spring and summer of 2001. The present study was not intended as an evaluation either of particular Outreach programs or of the overall operations of the synagogues visited. Rather, it is intended to be a systematic description of our observations as researchers. We have also drawn on these observations to make generalizations about the congregational attitudes and practices that foster integration of interfaith couples and encourage conversion.

To understand the experiences of interfaith and conversionary families in the congregational setting, site visits were made to six synagogues from the Reform Movement in two regions of the United States: the Northeast and the Southeast. The following section describes the strategies and methods employed in the implementation of this project from synagogue selection and planning for site visits through data collection from multiple sources within each congregation.

### Site Selection

The selection strategy, developed in consultation with UAHC, was designed to identify congregations representative of the larger population of synagogues on key factors such as size and geographic region. Three levels of synagogue size were included (fewer than 300 households, 300-1000 households, and more than 1000 households) and one synagogue of each size was selected within each of the two geographic regions. Efforts were also made to select synagogues that were similar in terms of their overall organizational health and their alignment with UAHC platforms.

Working with UAHC Outreach staff, 10 synagogues in the Northeast and 13 in the Southeast were identified as potential sites for study. From among these, an initial group of six was invited to participate. The UAHC was intentionally unaware of the identity of the selected synagogues.

The UAHC provided a letter of introduction and support for the project that was sent, by CMJS, to each of the selected synagogues prior to telephone contact. This letter, along with introductory information from CMJS, explained how synagogues were selected for participation and, in particular, explained that UAHC had no knowledge of the synagogues that had been contacted (see Appendix B). All six of the congregations that were contacted agreed to participate in the project.

### Protocol for Site Visits

Each synagogue was asked to identify a research liaison, either a staff member or lay leader. The liaison was the point of contact with the synagogue and assisted in orchestrating the CMJS team's site visit. Each site visit lasted between one and two days and was conducted by a team consisting of between one and four CMJS staff members (see Appendix C for a checklist of information sought during each site visit).

In an effort to gain a full picture of each synagogue's Outreach efforts, information was gathered from a variety of sources:

- **Key informant interviews**

Interviews were conducted with all synagogue staff or congregational leaders whose work related to the participation and integration of interfaith and conversionary families. This included clergy; professional staff with special attention to the director of Outreach (where available), family life educator, school director, and executive administrator; and congregational leadership including the board president and chairpersons of Outreach-related committees such as Outreach, membership, ritual, and education. Synagogues were also encouraged to include anyone else whom they felt might contribute an important perspective on Outreach efforts within the synagogue (see Appendix D for the key informant protocol and Appendix E for the rabbi interview protocol).

- **Focus group discussions**

Wherever possible, separate focus group discussions were held with members of interfaith, in-married, and conversionary households. Congregations were encouraged to include in focus groups both congregants who were very involved in and/or comfortable in the congregation as well as those who seemed to feel less at home in the synagogue and/or whose involvement was more marginal (see Appendix F for the focus group protocol).

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## Review of Archival Data

Congregations were asked to provide the site visit team with written policies, materials, and documents that described the ritual, governance, educational, and social activities of the congregation. These included policies regarding the participation of non-Jewish individuals in ritual, social, lifecycle, and governance activities, recruitment materials, synagogue brochures and marketing materials, orientation materials for new member households, the organizational chart of staff, board, and committee structure, descriptions of adult/family education or Outreach programs for the past year, as well as synagogue bulletins or newsletters for the last year (see Appendix G for a complete list of archival materials requested from each synagogue).



Site visits to the six congregations yielded rich data about the engagement of interfaith and conversionary families in synagogue life. From the multiple perspectives of congregants, lay leadership, professional staff, and rabbis, there emerged six broad themes:

1. Outreach efforts are changing as a result of changes in the larger social context.
2. Rabbis play multiple and pivotal roles in welcoming and integrating interfaith families.
3. The successes and struggles of Outreach are intertwined with the successes and struggles of the overall congregation.
4. Jewish education of children, a key point of contact between the interfaith family and the synagogue, brings opportunities for growth and for conflict.
5. Emotions and personal connections have a stronger effect on Jewish engagement and conversion than does Jewish learning.
6. Small congregations face unique challenges.

Each of these is described below with specific examples and overall impressions.

### Theme 1: Outreach Efforts are Changing as the Result of Changes in the Larger Social Context

Outreach as a guiding philosophy, and as a set of programs and orientation toward action and thought, is embedded within the local context of congregational life as well as the larger milieu of Jewish communal and cultural experience. There are several ways in which trends and developments in the environment have affected the scope, focus, and success of Outreach to interfaith and conversionary families.

#### a) Perceptions of Intermarriage and the Demographics of Synagogues Have Evolved

Rabbis and synagogue administrators made the point that ten and fifteen years ago, interfaith and conversionary families had only a limited presence in congregational life. For many, it was a struggle to achieve acceptance within the Jewish community. One rabbi recalled that his involvement with interfaith families at that time was in the context of a discussion group organized by unaffiliated interfaith families and conducted apart from the synagogue.

Since then, the demographic and cultural picture within the larger Jewish community, and within individual congregations, has changed dramatically. Both synagogue staff and members indicated that today there is much less of a stigma associated with being married outside of Judaism. In addition, an increasing number of synagogues, especially those we studied in urban settings, have become more diverse with the inclusion of not only interfaith but also multiracial and lesbian/gay households. With more congregational diversity, interfaith families find themselves increasingly in the mainstream rather than on the sidelines. Several focus group participants in these synagogues suggested that the presence of other “minority” segments within the congregation made them feel less marginal.

#### b) The Welcome Mat is Rolled Out

Without exception, the synagogues we visited view themselves and function as welcoming institutions for interfaith families. In focus group discussions, we were repeatedly told about the welcoming, warm, and *haimish* nature of the congregation and rabbi. The perception that the “gates” had been warmly and graciously opened seemed to be the foundation for feelings of belonging. Even those non-Jewish partners who were active in another faith community, or who were very open about their decision not to pursue conversion, felt comfortable whenever they attended synagogue activities. For those few non-Jewish partners who did not feel comfortable, their discomfort had more to do with global feelings about Judaism than it did with specific ways in which the congregation treated them.

There were, however, a small number of instances where we were informed that particular congregants would not attend a focus group in which their religious background would become known or could be inferred. In every case, these were congregants who were Jews by choice and had been part of the congregation for a number of years, yet still were concerned about the reactions their fellow congregants might have if their non-Jewish roots were to be revealed.

#### c) Outreach Programs Focused on Issues of Acceptance May No Longer be a Draw

Outreach activities that are primarily focused on issues of acceptance and religious diversity both within the nuclear family and in relation to the extended family, are losing their ability to draw participants. Five of the six congregations we visited were currently encountering difficulty in soliciting attendance for activities when they were publicized under the label of "Outreach." Some of these Outreach committees have, in response, significantly curtailed their activities. In three of the synagogues, the volunteer leader of Outreach revealed that the committee had either not met in the last six months or had not conducted any activities in that time period. In each case, the chairperson felt embarrassed, frustrated, and disappointed in his or her inability to reinvigorate Outreach or to gather participants for the kind of discussion and social activities that had been successful several years ago. In marked contrast, Outreach committees at two other synagogues have successfully begun to co-sponsor activities, such as special holiday celebrations, with other committees such as adult or family education. For example, in one synagogue, a hands-on series of workshops on holiday and festival celebrations is offered to all parents. Although these workshops are advertised in the synagogue's Outreach brochure, they are clearly described as designed for all families who wish to learn or expand their choices for celebrating with their children.

The volunteer leaders of Outreach were often individuals who had joined the congregation five to ten years ago and found the support offered by other interfaith families to be important at that time. Faced with the ambivalence of their families and the negative images of interfaith families within the larger Jewish community, they had been passionate advocates for Outreach activities. Their impression is that younger interfaith couples have experienced neither the same isolation nor lack of acceptance from their nuclear or congregational families and therefore are not in need of the same kinds of support. Focus group discussions supported these conjectures and made clear that most interfaith couples felt very comfortable with and open about their family's identity and were not attracted to special forums to address issues of acceptance.

The perception that things are different ten years later is not just confined to intermarriage. We found that in one large, urban synagogue, a similar pattern of waning interest was described in relation to a gay/lesbian *havurah*. This group was initiated about ten years ago to enable gay/lesbian families to feel accepted and supported within the congregation. As the number of these families have grown and as they have increasingly become part of the mainstream congregation, the need for a separate *havurah* has diminished.

#### d) Outreach is Beginning to Reach Out to New Groups

In response to the changing demographic picture, congregations in urban settings have begun to redefine the boundaries of Outreach to include other forms of diversity depending upon the characteristics of the surrounding community. Congregational professionals and lay leaders have begun to express interest in exploring the unique needs of multiracial families and of families with children with disabilities. For example, in one Northeast congregation an assistant rabbi told us that the best-attended workshop for interfaith families was one focused on helping multiracial families balance racial, cultural, and religious identities. The family life educator in the same congregation expressed concern about how congregational adolescents, who were also multiracial, would be treated in the larger Jewish community. There was significant concern about the acceptance that would be extended to these teens by Jewish organizations and individuals once they left for college.

Synagogues in ethnically diverse areas are faced with the challenge of extending Outreach activities to non-Jewish family members who come from non-European cultural traditions and whose first language may not be English. This trend was especially marked in the Southeast where we encountered many non-Jewish and Jewish by choice congregants with a Catholic, Latino/Hispanic background. These individuals were faced with learning both the ritual and the prevailing Ashkenazic cultural elements of Judaism. In one synagogue we were told of a particularly sensitive approach to this situation based on the recognition that authentic Judaism does not require an Eastern European orientation. In this synagogue a multi-ethnic Jewish cookbook grew out of discussions among congregants from diverse ethnic roots, thus honoring their cultural/ethnic identities.

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## Theme 2: Rabbis Play Multiple and Pivotal Roles in Welcoming and Integrating Interfaith Families

Rabbis are in a unique position either to welcome and encourage or to alienate and discourage the participation of interfaith and conversionary families in all aspects of congregational life.

Understanding the perspective and attitudes that these gatekeepers bring to their interactions with interfaith and conversionary families is an important part of the picture. Interviews with the rabbis themselves as well as with their staff and congregants revealed the multifaceted nature of their role in setting the tone of the relationship between the congregation and the family, in articulating the boundaries of participation by non-Jewish members in ritual observance, and in guiding individuals through the process of conversion. The following section describes the themes that emerged in considering the complex and dynamic relationship between rabbis and congregants from interfaith families.

### a) The Rabbi's Concern and Support for Engaged Interfaith Couples is the Critical Factor in Helping Them to Feel Welcome

Although accepted wisdom would suggest that a rabbi's policy toward officiating at interfaith marriages either opens or shuts the gate for interfaith families, interviews suggested that this is not the case. In four of the six congregations visited, the rabbi's policy was not to officiate at interfaith weddings. Although congregants, including board members, occasionally approached these rabbis to officiate at their children's interfaith marriages, the rabbis felt neither pressured nor censured because of their policy.

What stood out for congregants was not the rabbi's refusal to officiate but, instead, the concern and support he or she offered to the couple as they prepared for marriage. All of the rabbis who did not officiate explained in great detail why they would not. Several of the rabbis interviewed made a point of helping couples to find a rabbi who would perform the ceremony and then attended some of the marriages. These rabbis made a concerted effort to encourage the new couple to connect with the congregation thus leaving the door open for their future participation.

One rabbi, who now officiates at mixed marriages, did not do them for 20 years. Over time, however, he reported that he began to see that such couples were being ill served by what he characterized as "Marrying Sam" rabbis who officiate, but have little relationship with the couple before or after the wedding. This rabbi now officiates with clear guidelines: no co-officiation with Christian clergy, no Christian symbols or inappropriate music at the wedding, and a promise to raise the children as Jews. His philosophy is that the wedding is going to happen anyway, and by participating and being involved with the couple, he might make a difference in their long-term religious identity.

Another assistant rabbi indicated that while he does not currently officiate at interfaith marriages, he is re-evaluating this position. This rabbi has developed strong ties to the young adult members of his congregation and is considering how officiating at interfaith marriages fits into these relationships.

## b) Rabbis Set Policy for the Inclusion or Exclusion of Non-Jews in Services and Rituals

As non-Jewish partners become more integrated into the fabric of the congregational community the need arises to define the parameters of their role in rituals and services. At five of the six synagogues we visited, it was clear that the rabbi not only took the lead, but was also seen as the final arbiter of decisions regarding ritual life. For these rabbis, their right to make decisions about non-Jewish participation was part of a larger policy, either explicitly stated or implicitly understood, that granted them freedom of the pulpit. Even when individual board members and congregants did not agree with particular decisions, the rabbi's interpretation of *halacha* and adherence to an internally consistent framework were respected.

At a sixth congregation, the board, in direct response to a request from a prominent congregant who wanted his non-Jewish spouse to lead part of the *Shabbat* ritual, took the lead in setting policy. Their decision excluded non-Jews from the *bimah*. These were the strongest restrictions we observed against non-Jewish participation in services at any synagogue. Although the rabbi did not agree with the halachic underpinning of this policy, he did not feel able to resist or refuse its implementation.

When rabbis set policy, they address the issue in different ways. Two of the rabbis we interviewed held closely to *halacha* (both had been raised in traditionally observant homes), but found creative ways to involve non-Jews in services and rituals by "inventing" prayers or rituals for them so they did not engage in rituals that are only for Jews. When restrictions were placed on the involvement of non-Jews, the reasoning was carefully explained and they were offered these alternative forms of participation. For example, in one synagogue, non-Jews are not allowed to say the blessings associated with *Shabbat*. The explanation given is that these blessings are recited on behalf of the community and that recitation by a non-Jew does not fulfill the obligation of the Jewish congregation. Instead, the non-Jewish member is welcome to accompany their Jewish spouse in the blessing or to offer an additional reading.

This approach seemed particularly effective in connection with *b'nai mitzvah* ceremonies. It allows non-Jewish extended family members to participate actively. The resulting warm feelings toward the rabbi, the synagogue, and toward Judaism created a great deal of positive "PR" within all segments of the congregation.

At the other end of the spectrum, one rabbi had established a policy of full participation by non-Jews in all aspects of the service. When asked during our interview whether there were any controversies about the participation of non-Jews in services, he told us that there were none of which he was aware.

At the remaining three synagogues, participation by non-Jews was somewhere in the middle. In these synagogues, non-Jews were involved in most of the ritual elements of the service including lighting *Shabbat* candles, handing down the Torah, having an *aliyah*, and blessing their child. At one synagogue, interfaith parents of children with upcoming *b'nai mitzvah* ceremonies were given the opportunity to participate in a special preparatory session where they were invited to learn about and discuss their particular concerns.

Regardless of the approach, most of the non-Jewish congregants we interviewed were very pleased with the role their rabbi had allowed them to play in lifecycle events such as baby namings and *b'nai mitzvah* ceremonies.

### c) Most Rabbis Prefer Relationships with Non-Jews, Not Rules

Most rabbis interviewed as part of this study were reticent to state hard and fast policies with regard to the participation of non-Jewish members. Instead, they preferred to maintain an “intentional ambiguity” that allows them to consider each situation individually. One rabbi told us that drawing the line too starkly leads to problems. In discussing their approach to non-Jewish congregants, several rabbis pointed out that, for them, the most important element is their personal relationship with these members. In our discussions with congregants, it was clear that for many the key ingredient for their comfort and integration into the congregational community was, in fact, the relationship they had developed with the rabbi.

In one congregation we were told about a meeting between the rabbi and several non-Jewish wives that had fostered a turning point in their relationship with the synagogue. In this situation, the volunteer chair of Outreach became aware of a painful sense of isolation among these women that had originated with a previous rabbi. When a new rabbi joined the congregation, the chair advocated for a meeting with these congregants. The rabbi agreed and, not only did the ensuing discussion raise the rabbi's awareness about these women, it also allowed the congregants to let go of previous hurts and form lasting, warm connections to the rabbi and the congregation.

### d) The Rabbi is in a Unique Position to Open a Dialogue About Conversion But Often Does Not Do So

In our discussions with rabbis about their approach to conversion, it became clear that five of the six senior rabbis did not, as a rule, actively invite non-Jewish members to consider conversion. Their stance was to wait until the member indicated an interest directly to them. This was the case even when the rabbi suspected that a member might be considering conversion or when they had observed their growing engagement with Judaism. In one synagogue, a former rabbi had been known to ask non-Jewish members about their intentions to convert. One Jew by choice reported that this inquiry from the rabbi had been the “extra nudge” that he needed to make the first steps toward conversion.

The rabbi who did not fit this profile used his initial meetings with engaged, interfaith couples to introduce them to both his orientation and policy toward conversion and to the “conversion” classes offered by the synagogue. This rabbi has a firm policy of not conducting mixed marriages but conducts regularly and frequently scheduled “conversion” classes that are heavily populated by engaged couples. Couples who approach him are encouraged to consider conversion and are directed to these preparatory classes. As a result of this rabbi's attention to the initial contact and conversion activities, a number of young couples joined this synagogue who would not have otherwise become members, and a number of conversions similarly took place that would not have otherwise occurred. However, it is also interesting to note that even in this synagogue, the rabbi does not actively encourage conversion among interfaith couples joining the synagogue following their marriage.

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## Theme 3: The Successes and Struggles of Outreach are Intertwined with the Successes and Struggles of the Overall Congregation

Common wisdom tells us that people, whether Jewish or not, become more involved with a synagogue when they perceive it as exciting, authentic, and engaging. Our selection process took us to successful, active synagogues. None were stagnant or in decline. Congregants, both Jews and non-Jews alike, were proud to describe the intellectually stimulating and spiritually engaging aspects of their congregation and we found it difficult to distinguish a synagogue's ability to engage all congregants from its Outreach efforts. There were several ways in which the successes and struggles of the congregation at large were intertwined with the effectiveness of Outreach.

### a) Young Adults are Missing from Synagogue Life

With few exceptions, congregants younger than their mid-thirties did not attend individual interviews and focus group discussions. While this might have been an artifact of the process by which focus group participants had been chosen, both rabbis and synagogue administrators suggested that attracting unaffiliated young adults is a continuing problem for their synagogues. According to the synagogue members and professionals interviewed, most young couples do not join congregations until they have pre-school or school-age children. This has direct implications for newly married interfaith couples, who are unlikely to receive exposure to Jewish institutional influences until their first child is old enough for pre-school or Hebrew school.

In only one congregation did we see a concerted effort to reach out to and involve young, unaffiliated adults. This effort was enhanced by the presence of a rabbi whose portfolio specifically included Outreach to this population.

### b) Although Congregations Succeed at Helping Interfaith Families to Feel Welcome, They Do Less Well at Encouraging Them to Progress on Their Jewish Journey

The congregational welcome afforded interfaith families is warm and gracious. However, little effort is made to capitalize on this goodwill. We did not observe planned efforts by congregations to encourage interfaith couples to move along in their Jewish journey. Although each of the congregations visited offers a wide range of adult education courses and workshops, interfaith families — especially their non-Jewish members — are left on their own to choose where to begin and what opportunities to pursue.

Clearly, there is a delicate balance between making non-Jewish members feel comfortable and motivating them to try out new avenues of Jewish practice. We observed that congregations have done an excellent job of the former but have not made an effort to accomplish the latter. Making interfaith families feel welcome has taken precedence, and we observed missed opportunities that might have encouraged greater ritual and spiritual engagement. Consistently, when we raised this issue, we received answers that went something like: “I guess we could do more, but I’m not sure quite what we could do, since we don’t want to turn people off.” Once the welcome was extended, it seemed to be in poor taste to then ask something more.

### c) Synagogues Struggle with Policies Regarding Non-Jewish Members and Governance

Most of the synagogues we visited indicated that their policies and by-laws regarding the participation of non-Jewish members in governance were evolving. Policy evolution appeared to be tied to changing circumstances in the synagogue — as more and more non-Jews entered synagogue life and participated in a variety of ways, new arrangements needed to be made to accommodate their needs, and old policies needed to be restructured. Areas of tension and change generally involved such issues as who could be a member, rights of non-Jewish members and family members of those formerly married to Jews, dues for families with non-participating non-Jewish spouses (e.g. one spouse attends a church and never comes to synagogue), and the sphere of voting “rights” for non-Jews. In general, we observed a trend toward more and more inclusion of non-Jews in governance roles; however, this was not always the case.

Changes in policy with respect to non-Jews involved all elements of the synagogue — the rabbi, the board, lay leadership, and congregants. Several factors appeared to affect how these changes were initiated and adopted. Although we did find that boards generally deferred to the rabbi’s wishes, this was anything but uniform across synagogues, with a different dynamic at each one.

For example, one synagogue administrator characterized this relationship as a “delicious tension” where the board was ultimately more powerful than the rabbi but at the same time had a “tremendous respect for and desire... to follow the rabbi’s lead.” Sometimes the board initiated change, sometimes the rabbi did. This was the pattern whether the issue at hand related to interfaith families or to other more general synagogue business.

Two of the synagogues we visited have recently examined governance policies in response to the growing participation of non-Jews on committees and task forces. It is interesting to note that these were the two smallest congregations visited and both could foresee a time fast approaching when the congregational “resumes” of certain non-Jewish members would naturally lead them to be considered for leadership positions. In one of these synagogues we were told that somewhere between 25 percent and 40 percent of the members had joined within the last five or so years. This synagogue had recently completed construction on a new building and was located in an area with a growing Jewish population. The policy review in this congregation resulted in changes in the direction of establishing new restrictions on committee chairmanship and board membership or on reinforcing existing ones.

In the second synagogue, where membership growth was less pronounced, there was a great deal of sometimes divisive debate within the congregation about a change in the by-laws that granted voting rights to non-Jews, including the right to vote for a rabbi (see Theme 6 below regarding small congregations).

#### d) Jews by Choice and Non-Jews Often Inspire Jews by Birth

Although some might expect that the presence of large numbers of non-Jews and new Jews might dilute the authenticity of the spiritual life of a congregation, just the opposite was evident in most of the synagogues we visited. One of the recurring themes of individual and group interviews was the way in which non-Jewish parents and recent Jews by choice have served to catalyze a ritual and spiritual re-awakening among congregants who are Jewish by birth. In some interfaith families it is the non-Jewish parent that pushes for active participation in the congregation. As one non-Jewish father told us, “When we were married, I told my wife that if we were going to raise the kids as Jewish that we needed to do it right and join a synagogue before we had kids or else we should raise them Catholic.” In other words, once the choice was made to have a non-Jewish spouse, the Jewish partner needed to strengthen his or her own religious identity, and was motivated to become more involved in living a Jewish life.

Just as non-Jewish spouses often influenced their nuclear families toward greater synagogue participation, Jews by choice often serve as an inspiration to the congregation at large. At one synagogue, many Jewish congregants told us that one of the most moving and well-attended events at their synagogue was a Friday night service with a conversion ceremony. Witnessing the conversion of someone else to Judaism can inspire a Jew by birth to think about his or her own Jewish identity and practice. Although not all of the synagogues we visited were so public about conversions, we observed that there was a strong effect when the entire congregation was a witness to at least some part of the process. In one synagogue, recent conversions were posted on a bulletin board that also had areas for announcing new members, births, and deaths.

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## Theme 4: Jewish Education of Children, a Key Point of Contact Between the Interfaith Family and the Synagogue, Brings Opportunities for Growth and for Conflict

Whether the household is interfaith, conversionary, or in-married, the desire to give children a religious education is often the impetus for joining a synagogue. All of the synagogues visited have at

least a pre *b'nai mitzvah* Hebrew school and four of the six have a pre-school. Whether beginning in pre-school or in elementary-level Hebrew school, parents quickly find that they have gone from little or no regular contact with the congregation to weekly interactions with other parents, teachers, and clergy. It is in this context of ongoing dialogue that the family's issues regarding its own religious identity are played out. The following discussion focuses on several of the ways in which we observed the enactment of this dynamic interaction between parents and synagogues.

#### a) Children's Participation in Pre-school, Hebrew School, and Day School Can Jumpstart Jewish Learning by Non-Jewish and Jewish Parents

Many contemporary Jews by birth have limited knowledge of Jewish ritual and see their connection to Judaism as more ethnic than spiritual or religious (Cohen, 1988). In other words, they do not model, much less know, a vibrant and engaged Judaism that can be emulated by their non-Jewish spouse. As one director of education stated, it is hard to fault non-Jewish parents for not taking Jewish home rituals seriously when their Jewish spouses and peers appear indifferent.

The impact of the parents' knowledge and practices was most vivid among parents of school-age children. Synagogue educators teach Judaism to children in Hebrew or Sunday school, and when the children come home both the Jewish and non-Jewish parent can be unfamiliar with what the children have learned. Faced with this situation, several congregations have successfully instituted programs that enable parents to learn along with their children. Among families with pre-school and primary grade children, the approach received "high marks." For example, one synagogue has developed a "*Shabbat Box*" that all families take turns bringing home. The box contains everything that the family will need to celebrate *Shabbat* and *Havdalah*, including the prayers in Hebrew, English, and transliterated Hebrew, a tape of melodies, ritual objects, and step-by-step instructions. According to the pre-school's director, the success of the *Shabbat Box* arises from its universal use within the pre-school, allowing parents to learn without stigma or embarrassment.

Along similar lines, one of the synagogues visited has an affiliated day school, which also provides parents with opportunities for incidental learning of Jewish rituals and customs. Many parents, especially non-Jewish mothers and Jewish mothers without prior Jewish education, described how their volunteer involvement in the classroom and at school events was the beginning of their own Jewish learning.

#### b) Unresolved Issues Within the Interfaith Family Regarding Children's Religious Orientation Are Often Played Out in the Hebrew School

Hebrew school teachers, principals, rabbis, and cantors described to us a number of problematic and troubling scenarios involving children from interfaith families. The problems begin to appear around third grade and become greater as children grow older, with the most serious difficulties arising around the time of *b'nai mitzvah* preparation.

The most frequent difficulties arise when interfaith parents have not previously negotiated and agreed upon a comprehensive philosophy for how the child will be raised religiously. This ambiguity becomes apparent when the parents are faced with decisions about observance of religious holidays. One school administrator described a recurring dilemma for interfaith families in her synagogue. The local Christmas parade and festivities often coincided with synagogue observance of either *Shabbat* or *Hanukah* forcing families to choose which event they would attend.

Divorce in interfaith families further complicates the issue. One Hebrew school principal described situations in which children only came every other week because the non-Jewish parent refused to bring the child on the weekend he or she had custody.



Our interviews and focus groups made clear that issues around a *b'nai mitzvah* ceremony are especially loaded due to the involvement of the extended family and the fact that the child is making a public declaration of his/her preference for Judaism. Parents sometimes fail to listen to their child's wishes and synagogue staff must then talk with the child, meet with the parents, and wear a "tactful hat" to convey to them what is best for the child when that is not necessarily on the parents' "to do" list in planning for the *bar/bat mitzvah* event. This role as advocate for the child in some cases even extended to helping the parents to hear the child's desire to be identified as Christian. One rabbi summarized his philosophy in these situations by saying that "we win" if children grow up knowing that the synagogue is a safe and loving place.

### c) Rabbis and School Staff Are Critical in Bringing About a Positive Outcome When There are Problems with Children

School administrators and rabbis related to us that they are often sought out when crises over the family's religious identity and practice become serious. Nevertheless, they are often unaware of what is happening at home, especially for those congregants who are marginally involved in synagogue life. Hebrew school administrators were also aware that some problems manifest in ways that do not directly indicate the nature of the problem. For example, one school director conjectured that by the third grade children from interfaith families have learned not to mention their religious activities outside of Judaism because of the perceived or actual disapproval of their teachers or peers from in-married families. The net result is that a potentially useful avenue of communication has been lost and it therefore becomes difficult to prevent problems since they frequently do not come to light until they reach the crisis stage.

One cantor preparing a girl for her *bat mitzvah* ceremony discovered only a week or two before the event that the girl had been regularly participating in classes and taking communion at a church. The decision was made to proceed with the *bat mitzvah* ceremony because it would have devastated the child not to go ahead. Nevertheless, the incident brought to light the synagogue's inability to enforce a policy that children could not enroll in the Hebrew school if they were receiving instruction in another religion. When we asked school administrators about how this type of policy was implemented, we found that across the board, the philosophy was not to directly ask the parents about their child's involvement in other religious education or practice.

How synagogue staff handles the situation can be critical, yet Hebrew schoolteachers, who are on the frontlines of interaction with children and families, have little or no training in how to identify or deal with signs of family tension. Several school administrators described how their training of teachers extended only to tips on how to recognize and re-direct discussions of non-Jewish religious observance among students.

### d) The Jewish Role of Non-Jewish Mothers is Growing

In every synagogue, we heard about families where there are non-Jewish mothers who have not converted but have primary responsibility for raising their children as Jews. This can occur for several reasons. Some are divorced or widowed, yet committed to raising the children as Jews. Others are alienated from their Christian roots but, nonetheless, want their children to have a religion in spite of their Jewish husband's lack of interest. Others marry a Jewish male who adamantly wants his children to be Jewish, but feels his wife should do the work - either he does not know how or he has gender-based role expectations.

The mother's involvement can take many forms. Most frequently, she is the "*shlepper*" to and from Hebrew school, and just prior to a *bar/bat mitzvah* ceremony, to tutoring and attendance at services. Also, mothers set the tone at home since fathers aren't home as much. Because of this pivotal role,

mothers can support and encourage Jewish activities and learning at home, but only when they are so inclined and have something to contribute to their children's Jewish upbringing.

Several education directors indicated that while many of these parents are to be commended for their commitment to fostering their child's Jewish identity, others make only half-hearted efforts that diminish over time and drop off precipitously after the child's *bar* or *bat mitzvah* ceremony. These mothers indicated to us in focus groups that they often didn't know how to do the basics such as lighting *Shabbat* candles, preparing *Purim* costumes, or making *latkes*. The problem appears to arise jointly from mothers not having any prior exposure to Jewish ritual and custom and husbands whose own parents didn't provide them with an adequate Jewish education.

Whether or not the mother is Jewish appears to have a strong effect on the involvement of children in Jewish schooling. According to some school administrators, Jewish mothers are more likely to be insistent that their children go to Hebrew school regularly and that they do their Hebrew school homework. Non-Jewish mothers may not invoke the same level of participation since they don't have a background that would foster the same positive inclination toward Jewish learning — they get involved primarily because their husband or in-laws want the child to go. In addition, they are usually unable to help their children with such things as Hebrew or Yiddish terminology and cultural understandings. One school professional described a small but, for her, telling example. She recounted that in helping the children in the Hebrew school to tidy up the room she often would encourage them to look for "*schmutz*." Only those children who had a Jewish mother understood what she was saying, which made her wonder what other elements of cultural knowledge they were lacking.

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## Theme 5: Emotions and Personal Connections Have a Stronger Effect on Jewish Engagement and Conversion Than Does Jewish Learning

Many non-Jews convert in preparation for marriage to a Jew. However, there are others involved in synagogue life who either do not choose to convert or do so after living a Jewish life for a number of years. In our conversations with Jews by choice and non-Jews who are active in their congregations, we heard many stories with similar themes. Non-Jews, having married a Jew, gradually came to know other Jews, both synagogue professionals and those with whom they shared life-cycle events and holiday celebrations. More and more, their lives included events with Jewish themes and they found themselves linked into the synagogue through these personal connections. What at first seemed strange and uncomfortable about Judaism became, over time, warm and familiar. While most of those who went on to convert did not necessarily do so primarily to please their spouses, they acknowledged that their decisions took place within the context of these Jewish connections. We see Outreach as being most effective when it attends to these emotional and relational considerations. In this section we describe a variety of ways in which we observed feelings and personal connections playing a role in the successful integration of interfaith families and in the conversion process.

### a) Some Questions Never Come to the Attention of the Rabbi

Non-Jewish congregants who wish to learn about specific aspects of Judaism are sometimes reluctant to approach the rabbi, even when they feel that the rabbi is welcoming toward them. On one hand, their reluctance comes from their respect for the rabbi's position and their disinclination to "waste" his or her valuable time. On the other hand, asking questions also reveals their ignorance. It is more comfortable for them to keep quiet and save face. Undoubtedly, this is also a phenomenon among Jews by birth.

We found that the learning of Jewish ritual and custom was sometimes facilitated by the presence of informal mavens or mentors within the congregation who provided ongoing encouragement and information. Regardless of their official title or role, these individuals were easily approachable and understood the types of questions that someone unfamiliar to Judaism might have.

For example, in one congregation this role was played by a visible member of the congregation who was a Jew by choice. Based on this individual's own experiences and recollections of what was "not obvious" in Judaism, this informal coach was able to offer timely bits of information to non-Jewish and recently converted members. Over time, this individual became the "go to" person for congregants with questions that felt too trivial or embarrassing to ask the rabbi. Or, when members were not happy with what they had heard from the rabbi, they went to this individual for additional understanding so they could "feel OK" about the rabbi's decision. The rabbi was unaware of this person's role and this person did not share with him the nature and extent of the contacts with congregants on these issues.

Realizing that services and the prayer book may feel strange and alienating to non-Jewish members, another synagogue offers new interfaith families the opportunity to attend services with a mentoring family from the congregation who will be able to guide them through the liturgy and answer their questions.

### **b) There Are Many Ways that Non-Jews Can Initially Become Connected to the Synagogue**

In general, people become involved in synagogues for many reasons, and some of these reasons are not directly connected to Judaism. Congregants may become involved for social, charitable, or recreational reasons — to coach children in sports, to run a bake sale, to raise money for a meaningful cause, or just to assist with building maintenance. In our interviews, non-Jewish partners often related that they initially became involved to support the involvement of their spouse and children, and because they liked the synagogue and found it to be a place where they felt they could contribute. Later this might evolve into a more specific interest in Judaism, but for many, they just wanted to be part of a warm and caring community.

### **c) Many Strings Are More Binding Than One**

The connections between interfaith families and their synagogues are not static. Instead, they change in response to both the family's life cycle and the waxing and waning demands of the liturgical year. Families with multiple connections to and involvements with the congregation appear to be more likely to maintain their engagement with the synagogue over time.

For example, some of the parents we encountered from both interfaith and in-married families wistfully recalled the sense of community and connection that they felt at earlier stages of their Jewish journey. These feelings of connection were particularly strong when their children were in the synagogue's pre-school program or when they themselves were involved in non-synagogue affiliated programs for interfaith families such as "Stepping Stones." However, as the children grew and moved on to Hebrew school, parents did not have the same day-to-day contact with synagogue professionals or with other parents, leaving them with fewer ongoing connections to the congregation. Subsequently, there is a similar loss of connection following *b'nai mitzvah* ceremonies, and for those who continue on, at the culmination of Hebrew high school.

The same pattern is seen among young converts. One congregation visited was notable for the high number of conversions performed with young adults in preparation for marriage. For most of these converts, their primary link to Judaism was the charismatic rabbi. This rabbi was the only instructor in the "conversion" classes he held and unlike the other rabbis we interviewed, he did not convene a

*Beit Din* for conversions. As a result, the young converts in his congregation had a close connection with the rabbi but did not appear to have any relationship with other elements of the congregation or to *Clal Yisroel*. One recent convert told us that she had never been to another synagogue and had never met another rabbi. As these individuals moved away in time from the conversion process and from regular contact with their rabbi, they seemed to lose their sense of connection with the larger congregation.

#### d) The Choice to Live a Jewish Life is Embedded Within Personal Relationships and Social Networks

Some of the congregations we visited had many more “late-blooming” converts among long-time members than did others. At one mid-size congregation, a steady stream of non-Jews, who had been members for 10 or even 15 years, suddenly and unexpectedly approached the rabbi and indicated they wanted to convert. Their move came without any encouragement from the rabbi or from their Jewish spouses, who were also often caught by surprise. Almost all of these converts were male. Most of the families of these converts had come into the synagogue through a discussion group for unaffiliated interfaith families, and had remained close for 10 and 15 years. In addition, these non-Jewish men had spouses who were very active in the synagogue and the families tended to bond with each other through multiple points of contact including Outreach programs as well as social activities. In our focus group discussions, these Jews by choice acknowledged the support and encouragement they had received from this group of peers although none of them completely attributed their decision to convert to these affiliations.

Aside from peer encouragement, another factor in this congregation is the rabbi. Although rabbis at all of the synagogues were well-liked and respected, the rabbi at the synagogue just described was especially beloved, with a down-to-earth, approachable persona. His low-key attitude and accepting demeanor no doubt played a role in these decisions to convert. The men who chose to convert knew they would be working closely with him, and for them, this was a plus.

In other synagogues, the critical connection seemed to be with an Outreach volunteer or professional. At one Southeast synagogue, the leaders of the Introduction to Judaism course, who are in the process of becoming UAHC Outreach Fellows, made use of their own experiences in interfaith and marginalized families along with their professional knowledge. They integrated discussion of Jewish identity issues and the emotional aspects of conversion into a new program to complement the introductory course offered in their synagogue. They felt that this allowed them to connect on a personal level with the participants in the course and to address concerns and questions that were not covered in the more didactic course. After the first implementation of this revised curriculum, a larger than usual percentage of the participants were actively pursuing conversion.

In another congregation, those considering conversion are offered the opportunity to be connected with a “conversion buddy.” These mentors are members of the congregation, including Jews by choice, who offer support and guidance through the conversion process.

#### e) The Jewish Identity of Jews by Choice Evolves Over Time But Synagogues Do Not Provide Continuing Mentoring After Conversion

The choice to convert to Judaism can be seen more as an opening of a series of gates than an arrival at a destination. Many participants in focus group discussions who were Jews by choice reflected that it had taken them five to ten years post-conversion to really feel like a Jew. It was like becoming fluent in a second language. It took time to begin to “dream in Jewish.” Once the decision has been made to choose Judaism, the conversion process and the Jewish lifestyle that is subsequently

followed are not just about learning theology and ritual. There is a significant change in identity that evolves over the course of years and even decades. It has its origins in the simple experience of feeling good — with Jews, with the rabbi, and at synagogue.

We found little if any institutional support for Jews by choice during the years after conversion. In their effort to treat Jews by choice as they would any other Jew, rabbis and congregations do not make any efforts to continue mentoring or counseling, yet the convert is still dealing with the ongoing impact of their decision. A particularly poignant example of the ongoing issues faced by conversionary families, related to us by a rabbi, involved one in which both the husband and wife were Jews by choice. As the family approached the *bar mitzvah* ceremony of their child it became apparent that they would have neither support nor involvement from their extended family. It was only in the last few days prior to the event that the rabbi became aware of the situation and was able to rally congregational support for this family. While this situation had a good conclusion, it pointed out to the rabbi the lack of congregational supports for these kinds of conversionary families.

As another example, converts still have to deal with non-Jewish family members around Christian holidays, but Outreach programs such as the December Dilemma are targeted toward interfaith families. Synagogues seem to take the approach that once conversion is completed, problems cease, and this is far from the reality.

#### f) For Many Lay Leaders, Outreach is a Passion and a Cause

For many of the individuals we interviewed, Outreach is not simply a series of programs. It is a passion and a cause. Over and over, synagogue presidents, administrators, and Outreach committee members shared personal stories about their own histories, marriages, children's marriages, and conversions. These stories were powerful and at times even heart-rending.

As one particularly moving example, a woman who spearheaded many successful Outreach activities described to us how her Jewish mother had died when she was a child and her father had soon married a non-Jewish woman. Although the girl liked being Jewish, she also felt a strong connection to her stepmother and actively engaged in Christian practice and celebration. It was only as a college student and in dating a Jewish man that she revisited her religious identity and realized how marginal and different she had always felt in her church participation. As an adult volunteer in Jewish organizations, she witnessed the same marginalization of non-Jewish wives. The girl who felt like an outsider as a child, became a woman who is still "afire" in her desire to help those at the fringes of congregational life to feel more at home. Most recently, this passion motivated this individual to enter into training, through UAHC, to become an Outreach Fellow.

As a new generation of Jews by choice and those married to non-Jews or Jews by choice enter congregational leadership, they bring with them a sensitivity and sympathy toward the issues that non-Jewish members face. For many, their involvement in lay leadership is a way to institutionalize their interest and concern. In one congregation, the recently elected president of the synagogue is a Jew by choice. Part of this individual's motivation to seek this office came from the desire to show other Jews by choice and those considering conversion that in this synagogue, all doors will be open to them.

It became clear to us that successful Outreach activities were closely linked to the personal passion that leadership brought to bear. In cases where Outreach was not especially lively, we saw a "second generation" of leadership comprised of people who had taken Outreach over from a dynamic leader, but had done so out of a sense of dutiful responsibility, without the same level of personal investment.

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## Theme 6: Small Congregations Face Unique Challenges

Only one of the six synagogues we visited can truly be considered a small congregation (stable membership under 200 households). The other congregation we selected for this category can no longer be categorized as “small,” since it has been experiencing rapid growth and will soon have over 300 member households. This has come about largely as a result of a growing local Jewish population. Nevertheless, our observations and interviews at the one small congregation we did visit made it apparent that the situation faced by such synagogues, with regard to Outreach, is somewhat different from larger congregations with more resources.

### a) It Takes a Congregation to Run the Synagogue

Small synagogues are often understaffed. Without the financial means to hire staff, the maintenance of the organization and the successful accomplishment of its goals require that a large proportion of members need to take on a variety of roles. In the small congregation we visited there is an emphasis on volunteer involvement at every level of synagogue operation from the physical maintenance of the building and grounds to the staffing of the Hebrew school. One beneficial result is that members feel their involvement is genuinely needed and appreciated, and there is an active and ongoing recruitment of volunteer assistance. Many congregants within the synagogue we visited remarked on how quickly they were asked to get involved with specific tasks and projects. Non-Jewish partners, especially those with experience in the building trades, were well appreciated and many of them quickly became intimately familiar with the synagogue's physical plant.

### b) Non-Jews Have a Larger Role and Therefore it May Be More Difficult to Draw Boundaries Regarding Their Participation in Ritual and Governance

The need for small synagogues to draw from interfaith households for volunteer work serves as a double-edged sword. These synagogues rely on the active involvement of all the adults within member households, regardless of their religious identity, in order to get the work done. However, in the face of the tangible and significant contributions made by these non-Jewish members, it becomes difficult to draw boundaries between the role of Jews and non-Jews in ritual practice and governance of the congregation.

We saw this difficulty in drawing boundaries illustrated in several ways. The small congregation we visited relies on volunteers to teach in the Hebrew school, and at this point in time several of these teachers are non-Jews. Congregants were very appreciative of the willingness of these non-Jewish members to take on the responsibility of teaching. Although they had some reservations about the appropriateness of non-Jews serving as the religious mentors, they were far more concerned about the difficulty they would have in filling all teaching roles with Jewish members.

This congregation had also recently undergone a very difficult and divisive process of defining the role of non-Jewish partners in governance. In a close congregational vote, they decided to extend full voting privileges, including the right to vote on the retention and selection of the rabbi, to non-Jewish members. Those who supported the policy change did so because they did not feel they could deny the honor of voting to those non-Jews who had contributed so much of their time and effort to the success of the synagogue. The significant opposition to this vote came from congregants who felt that this decision represented the edge of a slippery slope that could eventually dilute the authenticity of their synagogue's Jewish practice. It is interesting to note that one of the congregants interviewed who was most upset about this decision was a Jew by choice who felt that his decision to convert was being diminished by this extension of the rights of membership. As he so cogently stated, “If they want to play the game they need to join the team.”

### c) The Tenure of Rabbis is Limited

Small synagogues are frequently faced with changes in their rabbinic leadership. Even small congregations that have the resources to hire a full time rabbi face the reality that their synagogue will be a stepping-stone for rabbis who will eventually seek a larger congregation. Different rabbis may bring with them different philosophies about the integration and involvement of non-Jewish members. It is hard for a congregation to develop a consistent approach in the face of this succession of potentially diverse perspectives.

The small congregation we visited had experienced four changes in rabbinic leadership in the last decade. Congregants described these rabbis as having very different styles and approaches to many aspects of congregational life, including inviting the participation of interfaith families. One Jew by choice told us how his entire relationship with the congregation had diminished after the departure of the rabbi who had led him through the conversion process.

In this congregation the decision to extend full voting rights to non-Jewish members was, in part, predicated on the congregation's confidence in the current rabbi's demonstrated ability to make *halacha*-based decisions about ritual participation. In other words, these members who voted to extend voting rights to non-Jewish members did so with implied reliance on the rabbi, who is seen as ritually conservative, to maintain the boundaries of non-Jewish participation in ritual practice. However, several of the older members, who have experienced a variety of rabbinic approaches, were less comfortable with this reliance on the rabbi and were concerned that the interpretation of the policy might take on unexpected dimensions should a new rabbi enter the picture.





An exploratory study has inherent limitations but also valuable strengths. On one hand, a sample of six congregations, regardless of how carefully selected is, perforce, not a representative sample of the Reform Movement. On the other hand, the opportunity to study these congregations intensively has produced an in-depth understanding of Outreach in the particular settings and has raised an extensive set of questions for future exploration. This exploratory study points to programming principles to guide the work of the UAHC Outreach Department, and highlights steps for future research.

### Programmatic Implications

Findings from the study point to a simplistic but important conclusion: Efforts to improve synagogues will necessarily improve them for interfaith families and converts as well. Conversely, efforts to reach and serve diverse families are likely to affect the synagogue overall. When a synagogue turns its attention to how it welcomes people into its midst, it is also likely to become more welcoming to interfaith couples and converts to Judaism. As the Outreach committee works to welcome the non-Jew and the convert, they may also teach the congregation something about how people are to be greeted and included. Thus, the programmatic principles that can be derived from the findings of this study are also principles that should apply to the work of the congregation overall.

#### 1. Personal relationships are the foundation upon which connections to the congregation and an engaged Jewish life are based.

Relationships are critically important in creating ties between the individual and the synagogue. There is the obvious connection with the rabbi who counsels the couple as they approach marriage or who teaches the introductory class on Judaism. But there is also the connection with the maven who answers questions in a way that helps converts and non-Jews maintain their dignity; the connection with a peer, recently converted to Judaism, who paves the way for other "late-bloomers" in the congregation to go forward with their own conversion; and the identification with the Introduction to Judaism teacher who has, herself, been through conversion. Members and leaders need to be sensitized to the value of these relationships. They need to understand that programs cannot substitute for relationships as the foundation of a congregation.

#### 2. Multiple points of contact between interfaith families and the synagogue are the best way to maintain engagement with the congregation across life-cycle transitions.

In one synagogue in our study, converts were connected solely through the charismatic rabbi. As these individuals moved past the conversion process and regular contact with the rabbi, they also seemed to lose their sense of connection with the larger congregation. In another congregation we learned that interfaith couples who were connected primarily through their Stepping Stones class felt at a loss once that class was over. And in several others, we heard parents describe how their relationship with the synagogue diminished when their children completed their religious education. These junctures mark transitions in the life of the family and in the family's relationship with the synagogue. They illustrate the importance of giving interfaith families multiple points of connection to the congregation, and particularly, points of connection that involve Jewish people and associations that can replace the "social glue" lost with the ending of a single program.

#### 3. Drawing young interfaith couples into congregational life provides avenues for Jewish influence in the formative years of family life.

Living a Jewish life does not begin when the children reach school age. Yet many young couples and families seem to be "missing in action" in the congregational scene. This means that in the early

formative years of the family, there are few, if any, institutional Jewish influences. For whatever reason, young couples have not experienced the warm congregational welcome that older couples and families described to us.

Even when young couples do join the synagogue they may feel marginal, as if they are still sitting at the “kiddies” table. At one congregation, which did have a sizeable population of young interfaith couples, we found it striking that there was continuing difficulty in attracting their participation. In our visit to the synagogue we noticed that the professional and administrative staff were all senior adults in their 60s and 70s. We could not help but speculate that the absence of peers in the synagogue’s operation contributed to the lack of engagement among young adults.

#### **4. Synagogue-based pre-schools and Hebrew schools are a key point of contact with interfaith families. School staff need more specific preparation to deal with the issues and needs presented by these families.**

Synagogue-based pre-schools and Hebrew schools are key institutions in the Jewish lives of families with children and it is particularly important that these schools be prepared to deal with non-Jewish parents and parents with little or no Jewish background. In congregations with large numbers of interfaith families, teachers and administrators would benefit from special training to understand the dynamics of the interfaith family and the issues that children are likely to face.

In particular, both the religious school and others responsible for education in the congregation need to be sensitive toward and provide support to those non-Jewish mothers who have primary responsibility for developing the Jewish identity of their children. Unlike Christianity, the birth religion of virtually all of these mothers, Judaism has a heavy emphasis on home ritual and celebration. Helping non-Jewish mothers to assume the unfamiliar role of being a religious role model at home suggests that they need instruction and mentoring.

The spouses of these mothers, Jewish fathers who have not chosen to take an active Jewish role in raising their children, also need encouragement and attention. This suggests that religious school, family, and adult educators should work together to provide education for the whole family, to ensure that parents, of whatever background, are prepared to create and maintain a Jewish home.

#### **5. Making interfaith families comfortable is only the first step in a process of guidance and support toward greater levels of Jewish involvement and observance.**

At the culmination of the *Yom Kippur* service, congregations ask that the gates to life, community, and peace be opened. The visually rich language of the liturgy depicts not one monolithic gate but a series, with the congregation asking to be allowed entrance at each successive entrance. In much the same way, drawing interfaith families into congregations can be a continuing process in which household members are invited to become progressively more engaged in Jewish ritual and communal life. The synagogues in the current study have had great success in opening the doors and creating a warm and inclusive environment so that people feel comfortable and at home. Interfaith families feel accepted and comfortable in their congregations. However, the picture presented is also one of missed opportunities — there is no structured effort to build on the momentum created once the first gate has been entered so that these families move toward more developed levels of knowledge, prayer, and observance.

As we saw in our visits, making programs and workshops available seems insufficient. A dialogue needs to be opened with interfaith families so that the synagogue can offer guidance and

encouragement for the next step of the journey. Over time, as families move through their own life cycle and as their Jewish knowledge and observance continues, this conversation can periodically be revisited in an ongoing process of challenge and growth.

**6. Even though there are many paths to conversion, becoming a Jew by choice is not the dominant inclination of non-Jewish congregants, so synagogue clergy and staff may need to provide more encouragement and direction.**

In our observations, there were many paths to conversion. For some, the primary reason to convert was to have a Jewish wedding ceremony. For others, it was the experience of a life-cycle event such as the upcoming *b'nai mitzvah* ceremony of a child or the death of a parent who would not have been comfortable with the conversion. In some instances there seemed to be a “social network” phenomenon in which the conversion of one spouse in a group of interconnected families seemed to trigger the conversion of other non-Jewish members. For some, there is no specific event or experience that leads to conversion. After living a Jewish life for many years, these individuals come to realize that they might as well make it official.

Although we observed numerous examples of each of these motivations leading to conversion, we also heard many descriptions of non-Jews who, despite being actively involved with the synagogue, did not convert. The dilemma is that in synagogues that are welcoming, there may be little incentive for non-Jews to take the next step. If they can participate in ritual, can vote on non-religious matters, and enjoy virtually all the same benefits of membership that Jews enjoy, then there is no external reason for them to make the effort to become Jews.

Many non-Jewish congregants seem to settle into a pattern of involvement that never brings them to consider conversion. With only one exception, the rabbis we interviewed did not feel it was their role to actively invite non-Jewish members to consider conversion. While, on rare occasions they did so, their stance was to wait until the congregant approached them. While this is a sensitive approach it unfortunately may result in many missed opportunities. Some individuals may need, as one Jew by choice expressed it, a “final nudge” to make the decision to convert.

**7. Conversion is the first rather than the last step in creating a Jewish identity and Jews by choice need ongoing support, education, and guidance.**

Building a Jewish identity and learning to feel comfortable within it takes time. The process may officially begin with conversion but it does not end there. Yet, in their well-intentioned efforts to treat Jews by choice as they would any other Jew, synagogues often neglect to address the special circumstances and needs of these members. The process of teaching and mentoring the non-Jew approaching conversion seems to abruptly end when the visit to the *mikvah* is over. Instead, the years following conversion should be a continuation of the process of active learning.

**8. Outreach may be more effective when it is integrated into all aspects of synagogue life.**

Clearly, congregants who were neither born nor raised Jewish have special issues that are well understood by those who work in Outreach. Nonetheless, the challenges they present to the congregation are the same as the challenges presented by any congregant — how to educate, motivate, and inspire the individual and the family to fully participate in Jewish life in the synagogue and at home. Outreach to the interfaith families in our midst may no longer be needed as a separate programmatic entity, but the goals of Outreach may be better served by weaving an attention to the needs of these families into all the aspects of synagogue life.

## 9. By identifying and reaffirming their core values, congregations lay the groundwork for integrating interfaith families, and at the same time maintain the integrity of Reform ritual and practice.

As the relative proportions of in-married and interfaith couples shift within congregations, interfaith families will have a growing role that will take congregations into uncharted territory with increasing interfaith involvement in ritual, governance, and education. All of the congregations we visited were eager to welcome interfaith families and accommodate their needs. Yet, sometimes concerns about inclusiveness seemed to obscure the synagogue's mission. In these congregations, distinctions between Jews and non-Jews were blurred and sometimes vanished altogether. At one synagogue, non-Jews had full participation in all aspects of services, and at another, non-Jews had voting rights for the choice of a rabbi. At several, non-Jews taught Jewish subjects in the Hebrew school.

Small congregations are particularly vulnerable in this regard. Their reliance on the active involvement of non-Jewish members to get the work of the synagogue accomplished also makes it difficult to draw boundaries between the roles of Jews and non-Jews. Congregations facing these challenges need guidance and support from the Reform Movement if they are to remain intact as Jewish institutions.

How these institutions maintain their core values may become the challenge of the next decade, just as accommodating interfaith families was the challenge of the previous decade. As Rabbi Eric Yoffie, President of the UAHC observed, "Intermarried couples are not attracted to us by minimalism or watered-down Judaism. They are attracted by compelling ethical teachings, by ritual experiences rich in meaning, by the mystery of Shabbat, and by the possibility of religious commandment" (1999, p. 3).

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## Future Research

The current study has drawn a finely grained picture of the experiences of interfaith and conversionary families within six Reform congregations. It has identified provocative programmatic and philosophical issues regarding the integration of these families. Yet we are still very much at the beginning of building a knowledge base that can inform decisions about policy and practice within local congregations and the national movement. Building this foundation of usable knowledge will involve addressing the following important questions:

### 1. How generalizable are the findings of this study to the broader population of Reform synagogues?

Synagogues are strongly affected by contextual factors that vary significantly from region to region. For example, compared with findings from the Northeast and Southeast, patterns of affiliation and the quality of synagogue life for interfaith families may be very different in regions like the South or West, where Jews are a small minority of the total population or where church-going is normative.

Expanding the research to include synagogues from regions around the country will allow us to examine how regional differences in religiosity, rates of intermarriage, size of Jewish population, strength of Jewish institutions, and other factors affect the evolution of Outreach philosophy, policies, and practices in congregations.

### 2. How is Outreach manifested in diverse congregational settings?

The six synagogues included in this exploratory study are all successful congregations. Outreach and the challenge of integrating interfaith families may look very different in start-up congregations or congregations in decline. We do not know about Outreach in congregations that are facing population shifts, budgetary crises, personnel changes, or major dysfunction on the board or about the

relationship between Outreach and other synagogue initiatives designed to enhance connection, education, and worship such as Synagogue 2000. The overall questions to be answered relate to how general congregational issues and struggles affect the synagogue's Outreach agenda.

### 3. What practices, policies and conditions foster the integration, connection, and engagement of interfaith families with the synagogue?

From a pragmatic perspective, the fundamental questions relate to which policies and programs are most effective at moving interfaith families toward integration and engagement with the synagogue. The goal is to identify and understand program elements that encourage and enable interfaith families to become integrated into the synagogue, to engage in Jewish study, to continue to grow Jewishly, to create Jewish homes, and to consider conversion. Answering this question requires that we look into the commonalities and differences in policies and programs across a number of synagogues. For example, how many congregations have a formal Outreach program and what does it include? How many have programs leading to conversion?

### 4. How has the growing diversity in membership affected synagogues?

The present analysis is primarily concerned with how the synagogue approaches Outreach and how the beneficiaries of Outreach react to the synagogue. However, the relationship between congregants and synagogues is a dynamic one and research should now examine how the synagogue is changing in response to new demographics and to the inclusion of people who have come to Judaism along diverse pathways.

Research should, for example, examine the impact of Outreach on synagogue membership, professional and lay leadership, policies, and programming. It should consider how the increasing diversity affects the core mission of the institution — worship, learning, and sense of community.

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## Concluding Thoughts

Our tradition tells us that: "The day is short [and] there is much work to do ..." (*Pirke Avot*, 2:15). Clearly, the task of synagogues has grown incredibly complex as a result of the increasing diversity of congregants and, in particular, the rising number of interfaith families. Our systematic study of a half dozen synagogues suggests that clergy and synagogue leadership are responding vigorously to the changing makeup of their congregations. They are developing uniquely Jewish responses to the challenges posed by interfaith families and seem committed and creative in trying to fashion new approaches. Although these congregations have much to be proud of, it is also clear they cannot be complacent. It is hoped that the present report, in documenting the nature of the challenge, suggests new paths for enhancing the Jewish engagement of interfaith and conversionary couples.



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### Fern Chertok, M.A.

#### Project Director and Research Associate, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies

Fern Chertok is a community psychologist and co-editor of *Researching Community Psychology: Issues of Theory and Methods*. She is also the author of the Perceived Sense of Community Scale. Her doctoral research focused on an intensive study of the experiences of connection, responsibility and mission within a Reform congregation. She is currently involved in an evaluation team, led by Amy Sales, which is studying the impact of the "Synagogue 2000" project, a nation-wide initiative to transform the spiritual life, practices, culture, and environment of synagogues.

Fern chairs the *Kehillah* (Community) committee at Congregation Beth El of the Sudbury River Valley in Sudbury, Massachusetts, where she has played a central role in their initiative to expand and enhance the sense of connection and shared purpose throughout the congregation.

### Mark I. Rosen, Ph.D.

#### Senior Research Associate, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies

Mark Rosen received his doctorate in industrial relations from the University of Wisconsin- Madison in 1989, with an emphasis in organizational behavior and social science research methodology. He has been a faculty member at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the University of Minnesota and Bentley College in Waltham, Massachusetts. Mark has also served as a consultant to a number of businesses and nonprofit organizations around the country.

Mark's writings on Jewish spiritual topics have been featured at the JewishFamily.com web site. His recent book, entitled *Thank You for Being Such a Pain: Spiritual Guidance for Dealing with Difficult People* is a synthesis of Jewish, Christian, and Buddhist teachings on relationships.

Mark spent the summer of 2000 interviewing intermarried couples in Atlanta, Denver, northern New Jersey, and New England as part of the American Jewish Committee research project on intermarriage led by Professor Sylvia Barack Fishman.

### Amy L. Sales, Ph.D.

#### Senior Research Associate, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies

Amy Sales, a social psychologist, has been a senior research associate at the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies for the past ten years. Much of her current research focuses on synagogues. Amy is studying the experience of congregations that have received grants from the Grotta Foundation to create or expand their older adult services. She is also conducting evaluation research for Synagogue 2000, a trans-denominational project aimed at revitalizing synagogues and she has headed the evaluation of *Sh'arim*, an initiative that supports Jewish family educators in synagogues in Greater Boston. Her other research has concerned the needs and interests of Jewish teens, the status of contemporary American Jewish women, decision making in Jewish family foundations, the role of Jewish summer camps in socializing Jewish children, and teen reactions to the Israel experience.

Leonard Saxe, Ph.D.

Director, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies.

Leonard Saxe is a social psychologist and Professor of Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University. His recent work focuses on the development of Jewish identity and has included studies of Jewish adolescents, Jewish camping, and day school education. He also directs a large evaluation study of the *birthright israel* initiative. The Cohen Center has been involved in several studies of intermarriage and is involved, as well, in studying synagogue renewal. Professor Saxe is an author and/or editor of more than 150 publications, including numerous articles and chapters on applications of psychological research.

Professor Saxe is involved in a variety of Jewish educational activities and is a member of the Board of Governors of Haifa University. As a layperson, he is co-chair of the Steering Committee of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies' Boston-Haifa Partnership and has been an active member of Boston's Rashi School community.

## Appendix B Introductory Materials for Synagogues

The following letters and materials were sent to the senior rabbi and the congregation president of each of the synagogues invited to participate in the study.

March 12, 2001

Name

Congregation Name

Congregation Address

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

We would like to invite "Congregation Name" to participate in an important research project entitled "Outreach Families in the Sacred Common". The project has been initiated and funded by the William and Lottie Daniel Department of Outreach of UAHC and will be conducted by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University. The goal of this project is to understand how Reform congregations engage and integrate interfaith and conversionary families.

Six UAHC synagogues are being asked to participate. Congregations of varying sizes and with demographically different profiles were chosen from two regions (Northeast and Southeast). We are interested in learning how Outreach issues are dealt with in a variety of congregations and we hope that you will be interested in working with us.

Reform congregations have been at the forefront of efforts to welcome interfaith and conversionary families into the Jewish community and Jewish life. To further these efforts it is important to learn more about those aspects of congregational life that affect the comfort, integration, and participation of individuals from interfaith and conversionary families. Working with synagogues like yours, this investigation will help us to better understand issues that are of central concern to synagogue leaders.

Although our primary goal is to conduct research that will be useful to the Reform Movement, this project provides an opportunity for your synagogue to take stock of its approach to the integration of interfaith and conversionary families. Each participating synagogue will receive a summary report describing the experiences of their interfaith and conversionary families.

To acquaint you further with this project, enclosed is an informational sheet providing answers to the initial questions you may have. Fern Chertok, the Project Director will be contacting you in the next week to discuss further this project. Should you have any questions before we speak, you can reach her at (781) 736-2060 or Fchertok@brandeis.edu.

Thank you for giving these materials and this project your careful consideration. We look forward to working with you and "Congregation Name". We anticipate that your congregation's insights and experiences will make an important contribution to everyone's understanding of Outreach.

Sincerely,

Fern Chertok, Project Director

Leonard Saxe, Ph.D., Director, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies

Mark Rosen, Ph.D., Senior Research Associate

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March 7, 2001

12 Adar 5761

Be happy!

Dear Rabbi and Temple President:

Please excuse the generic greeting, but you will understand why you are being addressed in this way in a minute.

During the past twenty-three years, Reform Jewish Outreach has grown from a revolutionary idea to an established part of the program of the Reform Movement. It is now time, as Rabbi Alexander Schindler z"l urged us, to stand back and evaluate its impact. Is the Outreach message heard by interfaith couples and families? Do they feel part of congregational life? Which factors ease their way and which deter them? What leads some people to choose Judaism and others not? How is Outreach really working in Reform synagogues? What can we do to enhance its effectiveness?

The William and Lottie Daniel Department of Outreach has contracted with the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University to conduct this research on our behalf. Six Reform congregations of various sizes in areas with differing demographic profiles will be studied in some depth. The enclosed materials from the Cohen Center will outline more fully the scope of the study and your part in it, should you agree to participate. To assure the reliability and ultimate usefulness of the results, we will not know the identity of the congregations being studied, hence the "dear rabbi/dear president" salutation.

We hope that you will agree to participate in this study that will be so important for the future of our movement's Outreach program. Although serving as a research site will clearly make a claim on your time, we feel certain that it will provide commensurate insight and benefit directly to your congregation, as well as to all those-congregational leaders and individuals and families seeking a welcome-who will learn from you in the future.

B'shalom,

Dr. Marcia Abraham  
Rabbi Stephen J. Einstein  
Dru Greenwood

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## *Outreach Families in the Sacred Common*

### Answers to Questions You May Have

#### 1. What is the purpose of this project?

To better understand the aspects of congregational life that may affect the comfort, integration, and participation of individuals in interfaith and conversionary households. This project will help us understand questions including:

- How accepted, comfortable, integrated, and involved in synagogue life are individuals from interfaith and conversionary households?
- What attitudes, practices, and programs facilitate/inhibit involvement and sense of community among these families?
- What are the roles of synagogue professionals and lay leadership in welcoming individuals from interfaith and conversionary families?

#### 2. How is this project funded?

The William and Lottie Daniel Department of Outreach of the UAHC has contracted with the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS) at Brandeis University to conduct this project.

#### 3. How was this synagogue chosen for participation in this project?

To stretch limited resources, while examining a range of congregations, it was decided to focus on a small number of synagogues in at least two regions of the United States (the Northeast and the Southeast). A list of potential synagogues was provided by UAHC. The Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies then independently selected those synagogues to be invited to participate. Our selection strategy identified six UAHC congregations from these two areas, representative of the larger population of synagogues on key factors such as size, and demographic profile.

#### 4. Should our synagogue participate even if we don't have an extensive "Outreach Program"?

Absolutely! Synagogues were chosen that would represent a variety of policies and approaches to working with interfaith and conversionary families. We look forward to learning about your synagogue's current strategies and insights and future opportunities.

#### 5. How will information be gathered for this project?

A 2-3 person research team from the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies will spend approximately two days visiting each synagogue. During this time they will:

- Conduct face-to-face interviews with knowledgeable informants, including rabbis, professional staff, and lay leaders.
- Hold focus group discussions with groups of 10 - 15 congregation members from interfaith, conversionary, and in-married households. Where possible, focus groups or individual interviews will also be conducted with individuals from interfaith or conversionary families that have recently left the congregation.
- Questionnaires will be developed that can be mailed to a sample of individual members asking about their attitudes, level and extent of participation, and Jewish and socio-demographic background.
- Printed information pertaining to Outreach will be collected from each synagogue including written policies, recruitment and orientation materials, and descriptions of educational an/or Outreach programs and activities.

## 6. What specifically will our synagogue need to do?

Participating synagogues are asked to assist the project team in the following ways:

- Communicate the synagogue's participation and support for the project to the congregation.
- Provide space for interviews and focus groups.
- Schedule and confirm participation in individual interviews and focus groups.
- Provide mailing information/assistance.

## 7. What are the benefits to our synagogue for participating?

Your synagogue's experience is a source of learning for others in the movement and your assistance is critical to enable this project to be conducted. The project also provides an opportunity to assess your synagogue's approach to the integration of interfaith and conversionary families. Each participating synagogue will receive a report summarizing the experiences of their interfaith and conversionary families.

## 8. What will happen to the information provided by our synagogue?

In accordance with standard guidelines for informed consent, we will protect participants' confidentiality and anonymity. Individual responses, whether from interviews, focus groups, or questionnaires, will be considered confidential and will only be seen by the research team. A summary report will be generated describing the patterns and themes emerging from information collected across synagogues. This report will be made available to UAHC as well as to each of the participating synagogues. Copies of individual congregation summaries, with the identifying information removed, will also be made available to UAHC.

## Section I Synagogue Information

1. Size of congregation
2. Changes in size/composition of congregation in last five years?
3. Number of interfaith households
4. Change in interfaith population in last five years?
5. Number of Jew by Choice households
6. Change in Jew by Choice households in last five years?
7. Tenure of senior rabbi
8. Are records kept about the religious identification of all the members of each household?
9. How does the synagogue learn about the religious identification of members?  
 Phone interview prior to application  
 Membership application  
 School registration forms  
 Do not ask  
 Other (describe)
10. Recent history of synagogue.

## Section II Outreach Activities

11. What is the history of Outreach in this synagogue?
12. Is there a standing committee that deals with Outreach? YES NO
13. What is this committee called?
14. How often has this committee met in the last year?
15. How large is this committee?
16. How long has this committee been in existence?
17. How was this committee originally formed?

18. Who on the Board does this committee report to?
19. Is there an Outreach position on staff? YES NO
20. Is there a lay director of Outreach? YES NO
21. Is there anything special about the orientation of new interfaith households?
- Special orientation
  - Welcome by designated Outreach staff person
  - Welcome by Outreach chairperson
  - Welcome by designated Outreach volunteer
  - Connection to other interfaith families
  - Special orientation to religious school
  - Other (describe)
22. How well does this orientation work for interfaith families?
23. Does the Outreach committee or the synagogue provide special Outreach issue programming?
- YES NO
- Times and Seasons
  - Let's Talk
  - December Dilemma
  - Raising children in an interfaith household
  - And Baby Makes Three
  - Interfaith dating
  - When your child loves someone who is not Jewish
  - Other (describe)
24. Are these identified as "Outreach" programs? YES NO
25. How many members participated in these activities last year?
26. Is this more or less than in previous years?
27. Does the Outreach committee or synagogue sponsor or co-sponsor introductory education programs? YES NO
- Introduction to Judaism
  - Bridge to Home
  - Jewish Home Companion Series
  - Learner's minyan
  - Tot Shabbat
  - Basic Hebrew
  - Torah Trop
  - How to do Shabbat
  - How to do Havdalah
  - How to conduct a Seder
  - How to build a Succah
  - How to celebrate Purim
  - How to celebrate Hanukkah
  - Jewish cooking
  - Other (describe)



28. How many members participated in these activities last year?
29. Is this more or less than previous years?
30. Are these identified as "Outreach" programs?      YES    NO
31. How do interfaith families find out about these offerings?
- Bulletin/Newsletter listing
  - General mailing of special announcement
  - Targeted mailing of special announcement
  - Personal phone call
  - Other (describe)
32. Is there special issue programming targeted to Jews by Choice?
33. Is Outreach mentioned in:
- Brochure
  - New member materials
  - New member orientation
  - Regular feature in newsletter/bulletin
  - Designated Outreach Bulletin board
  - Listing of adult/family education offerings
34. Do any of these synagogue materials or formats specifically mention the synagogue's welcome of interfaith families? Which ones?
35. Are there any special annual Outreach activities? YES    NO
- Outreach Shabbat
  - Outreach Seder
  - Outreach dinners
  - Outreach Hanukkah celebration
  - Other (describe)
36. Is there an "Outreach" shelf in the library? YES    NO  
What is on it?
37. Are there alternative entry level programs for interfaith families that have not made a decision about the religious identification of their children?
- Stepping Stones
  - Creating Jewish memories
  - First Steps
  - Other (describe)

### Section III

## Policies Regarding the Participation of Non-Jewish Members

38. What is the synagogue's policy regarding the membership status of non-Jews?
39. What is the synagogue's policy regarding the role of non-Jewish members in governance? Are there committees that they may not serve on or roles that they may not assume?

40. What is the synagogue's policy regarding the voting rights of non-Jewish members?
41. What is the synagogue's policy regarding the role of non-Jewish members in the following ritual activities:
- Baby naming ceremony
  - B'nai mitzvah
  - Lighting Shabbat candles at Friday night service
  - Aliyah
  - Presence on Bimah
  - Interfaith Weddings conducted in building
  - Burial in synagogue cemetery
  - Shiva service for non-Jewish member
  - Yahrzeit for non-Jewish member
  - Shiva service for non-Jewish extended family
  - Yahrzeit for non-Jewish extended family
42. What is the rabbi's policy regarding officiating at interfaith weddings?
43. What is the rabbi's policy regarding officiating at the funeral of a non-Jewish member?

## Section IV

### Conversion

44. Does the rabbi officiate at conversions?
45. Which of the following are required for conversion?
- Introduction to Judaism course
  - Beit Din
  - Counseling/instruction by rabbi
  - Mentoring by lay member
  - Circumcision
  - Mikvah
  - Other (describe)
46. How are conversions announced to the congregation?
- Bulletin/Newsletter
  - From pulpit
  - Bulletin Board
  - Special ceremony as part of services
  - Special ceremony separate from services
  - Other (describe)
47. How are non-Jewish members made aware of the steps toward conversion?
- Special brochure
  - Congregation Handbook
  - New member orientation
  - Other (describe)

48. After conversion which of the following are expected of the Jew by Choice?
- Counseling/instruction by rabbi
  - Mentoring with lay member
  - Participation in adult education
  - Participation in issue focused discussion group
  - Other (describe)
49. Are non-Jewish members approached about their interest in conversion? YES NO
50. Who usually does the initial approach and how is it done?
51. When are non-Jewish members usually approached about their interest in conversion?
52. Is there a "Conversion" shelf in the library? YES NO  
What is on it?
53. How many conversions were conducted in the last year?
54. Is this number more or less than in previous years?



## Appendix D Key Informant Interview Protocol

The following questions were used to begin key informant interviews. They were followed by more specific questions based on the role of the interviewee.

1. Describe your role (volunteer position) in this congregation.
2. How does what you do impact on interfaith or conversionary households?
3. How has the presence of a diversity of families impacted on or altered what you do in your role within the congregation?
4. From your perspective, how has the presence of a diversity of families impacted on congregational life in this synagogue?

On prayer?

On community building?

On education?

On leadership/volunteerism?

5. Where do you think you have succeeded in your efforts to welcome and involve interfaith families?  
Conversionary families?
6. What are your greatest challenges in trying to welcome and involve these families?
7. What else would we need to know, that we may not have asked, in order to understand the experiences of interfaith or Jew by Choice families in this congregation?



1. What would we need to know about this synagogue in order to understand Outreach within the larger context of the congregation?  
Location?  
Size?  
History?
2. What is the history of Outreach and the involvement of interfaith families in this synagogue?
3. What is the history of your rabbinate as it relates to Outreach and the involvement of interfaith families?
4. What has been the impact of the presence of interfaith and conversionary families on congregational life in this synagogue?  
On prayer?  
On education?  
On building a sense of community?  
On leadership/volunteerism?
5. How has the congregation been able to hold together in the face of this diversity?
6. What is your policy regarding:  
Officiating at interfaith weddings?  
Officiating at the funeral of non-Jewish members?
7. How did you come to this policy?
8. How comfortable are you with this policy?
9. What do you see as the central mission of your rabbinate as it relates to interfaith families?
10. What has been most challenging or frustrating to you in achieving that goal?
11. What has been your philosophy or strategy with regard to bringing people to conversion?
12. What else would we need to know in order to understand the experiences of interfaith and conversionary families in this congregation?





## Appendix F Focus Group Protocol

1. On one side of the index card write down 2-3 activities, programs or aspects of this congregation that have had an impact on the lives of you or your family. On the other side write down 2-3 activities, programs or aspects of this congregation that have not had an impact on your family.
2. Let's start by having everyone give their name, their religious identification, and their answer to the first side of the card.
3. How about the other side of the card. What did you answer there?
4. What would it mean to you to have a sense of community in a congregation?
5. Can you describe a time, or an occasion when you felt that kind of sense of community here in this congregation?
6. Can you think of a time when you distinctly felt the lack of a sense of community in this congregation?
7. How does the diversity of families represented in this congregation impact on this sense of connection and belonging?
8. How has being part of this congregation helped your family and you explore and expand your connection to Judaism?
9. What, if any, have been the barriers in this congregation to you and your family exploring and expanding your connection to Judaism?



## Appendix G Archival Materials List

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The following materials were requested from each synagogue.

- Written policies regarding the participation of non-Jewish individuals in ritual, social, life cycle, and governance activities.
- Recruitment materials and synagogue brochures.
- Orientation materials/ New member packets.
- Organizational chart of Board and committee structure.
- Description and schedule of adult/family education programs for the past year.
- Announcements/descriptions of Outreach activities for the past year.
- Synagogue bulletins or newsletters for the last year.

