AN ASSESSMENT OF A SYNAGOGUE

VOLUNTARY DUES POLICY:

THE TEMPLE EMANU-EL EXPERIENCE

1997

Dr. Joel Streicker

Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies
Institute for Community & Religion

BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY

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INTRODUCTION

Temple Emanu-El of San Francisco (TEE) established a “voluntary dues” new member policy in July 1996. New members who joined during the year beginning on that date may choose not to pay membership dues for one year. This bold initiative addresses an issue often recognized but seldom directly confronted in the American Jewish community: cost as a barrier to synagogue membership. The policy appears to have achieved notable success, as 170 new members joined the Temple between July 1996 and January of 1997, a major increase from the yearly average of 50 new members in previous years. The initiative was underwritten by a family bequest. However, the monies from the bequest were not utilized because 48% of new members elected to pay dues.

This report, based on a mail survey and focus groups, examines the impact of the voluntary dues policy on new members’ decision to join TEE. When TEE announced its intention to establish the voluntary dues policy, some Jewish community leaders feared that the policy would induce significant numbers of households to switch their synagogue membership to TEE. This decidedly has not been the case. Only 5% of new members left other synagogues in order to join TEE. Indeed, the study indicates that most new members had not previously belonged to a synagogue as adults. The new policy therefore does not siphon off members of other congregations; rather, it has attracted the unaffiliated.

The cost of synagogue membership is a major issue for the new members. Most report that the cost of membership was an important factor inhibiting them from belonging to a synagogue prior to joining TEE. Accordingly, most also stated that TEE’s voluntary dues policy and affordability were the most important considerations in their decision to join the synagogue.

The voluntary dues policy has successfully drawn a large number of previously unaffiliated Jews. Cost has been a major barrier to membership for these individuals, and the voluntary dues policy has helped overcome this obstacle. The new policy and the rabbis’ and staff’s welcoming gestures seem to be going a long way toward generating longer-term commitment on the part of these individuals, many of whom had previously harbored doubts about what the synagogue could offer them. The voluntary dues policy thus has profound implications for the synagogue community.
MAJOR FINDINGS

Reducing Dues Draws the Unaffiliated

The voluntary dues policy draws mainly unaffiliated Jews; few new members report having switched membership to TEE from a local synagogue. Seventy-three percent (73%) of the new members had never belonged to a synagogue as an adult. Only four out of 77 new member respondents (or 5%) had belonged to a synagogue up until the time that they joined TEE.

Voluntary Dues is a Powerful Incentive for Joining a Synagogue

New members report that TEE’s voluntary dues policy was the most important reason for joining TEE. Seventy-eight percent (78%) of new members stated that the voluntary dues policy was very important or important (including 53% who said that it was very important) in their decision.

Cost is a Major Financial Barrier

Cost was important to most new members in their decision not to join a synagogue prior to membership at Temple Emanu-El. Forty-four percent (44%) of members said that cost was very important, and 35% said that it was important, in their decision not to join a synagogue. As one focus group participant stated, summarizing a widespread sentiment: “It was too expensive to join.”

Cost is a Major Psychological Barrier

Individuals do not weigh the issue of cost in isolation from other factors. Judging by the household income data, many of the new members most likely could afford to join a synagogue and pay full dues. However, some new members tend to calculate the cost of joining a synagogue in terms of other priorities in their lives. Many new members who had not previously been synagogue members were hesitant to join a synagogue because they did not know what they would receive in return for paying for membership. These individuals value the voluntary dues policy because it enables them to get a sense of what synagogue life is like before committing to paying what they consider to be a large sum of money for membership.

Lower Cost Attracts Young Single Adults

Cost was an especially difficult barrier for young single adults to overcome. Young single adults tend to perceive the cost of synagogue membership as more affordable for families than for single individuals.

Many New Members Choose to Pay

Nearly half (48%) of the new members elected to pay dues rather than participate as free members. Thus the cost to Temple Emanu-El for this program was lower than anticipated.
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Jewish Community Federation, in association with the Northern California Board of Rabbis should convene a panel of rabbis, synagogue administrators, presidents of synagogue boards, and Jewish family foundations in order to study the feasibility of instituting a one-year, community-wide voluntary dues policy. Moreover, this policy might be discussed as part of a longer-term effort to establish broader communal funding for synagogues.

TEE should continue to dedicate significant staff resources to efforts to embrace new members. Mailings and staff phone calls to new members should be complemented by special activities for new members.

TEE should involve the new members who availed themselves of the voluntary dues policy in efforts to attract other unaffiliated individuals. For example, TEE might sponsor informational meetings for prospective members in which the new members share their stories of movement toward greater involvement. These meetings should take place six months to a year after the end of the voluntary dues policy so that these individuals would be able to speak of their experiences during the voluntary dues policy period and of their feelings toward the synagogue as dues-paying members.

TEE should make more widely known its policy of never refusing membership due to the inability to pay standard dues. A publicity campaign that reduces the inhibitions that many individuals feel regarding asking for a fee reduction is much needed.

TEE should conduct follow-up research on an annual basis. Follow-up research would have several purposes:

- To determine TEE’s success in retaining new members.

- To examine the role of the new policy, as well as other issues, in new members’ decision to renew or cancel their membership.

- To establish whether and in what respects new member cohorts differ from one another. Obtaining this information would enable TEE to determine the new policy’s success in attracting demographic segments that are underrepresented in the congregation or that TEE wishes to draw in larger numbers.

Taken together, the data gathered through follow-up research could have important implications for TEE’s marketing a similar program in the future, as well as for programming and services to incoming members.
Family Composition
Couples with children under the age of 18 account for 35% of new member households, while 29% are comprised of a couple without children living at home. Twenty-seven percent of new member households are made up of a single individual; single parents with children under the age of 18 comprise 5% of new member households. Four percent of new member households report having a different configuration.

Marital Status
Most synagogue membership rolls are comprised overwhelmingly of married people. For example, a sample of 1332 members of four Bay Area synagogues (two Reform, two Conservative) taken in the summer of 1995 as part of the research on the Koret Synagogue Initiative revealed that 68% of adult members are married. In contrast, TEE’s voluntary dues policy has drawn individuals whose marital status is much more evenly distributed among the possible categories. Fifty-eight percent (58%) of the new members are married or live with a partner. A larger proportion of new members are either single (27%) or divorced/separated (13%), compared to 14% and 18%, respectively, at the four Koret Synagogue Initiative synagogues.

Place of Birth
New members tend to have relatively shallow roots in the Bay Area. Most new members (87%) were born outside the Bay Area. Thirty-five percent (35%) of new members have moved to the Bay Area since 1990, including 23% who have moved here since 1993.

Jewish Identity
New members present something of an anomaly with respect to their Jewish identity. On the one hand, by certain measures (such as intermarriage and identification with a particular movement within Judaism) they are on the margins of Jewish life. On the other hand, their attitudes toward Judaism and Jewish life do not differ greatly from those of a sample of 428 Sherith Israel members taken in the summer of 1995 as part of the research on the Koret Synagogue Initiative.

New members’ relative marginality is suggested by their high rates of intermarriage and weak identification with Judaism’s movements. Nearly half (46%) of married new members are in interfaith marriages, compared with 31% of American Jews, as determined by the National Jewish Population Survey. Moreover, 42% of new members do not identify their household as belonging to one of the four movements within Judaism, including 31% who label themselves “just Jewish” and 11% who use something other than a movement label to identify their household. In contrast, the National Jewish Population Survey indicated that 20% of adult American Jews do not identify themselves by a movement label. Only 55% of new members report that their household is Reform; 3% identify as Conservative and 1% identify as Jewish Renewal. As numerous studies have shown, individuals who identify with a movement tend to be more actively engaged in various
als, or 65%) had discontinued their membership at least three years ago.

The focus groups suggest that those who previously belonged to a synagogue did so in order for their children to attend religious school. Three of the eleven focus group participants had joined a synagogue for their children’s religious education. The initial motivation was child-oriented and, in two cases, the parents did not become involved in synagogue life. These parents felt that the institution did not hold any value for them and thus they left the synagogue when their children had completed their religious education.

Cost

Cost was a major factor in new members’ decision to join or not to join a synagogue prior to affiliating with TEE. New members also cite TEE’s affordability as the most important factor in their decision to join TEE.

The survey reveals that cost was an important factor in the decision of the previously affiliated to join their particular synagogue. Two-thirds (67%, or 14 individuals) of those who had belonged to a synagogue before joining TEE report that cost was very important or important in their decision to join their synagogue.

Figure 2
Have You Ever Belonged to a Synagogue?

Yes, in the Bay Area 15%
Yes, outside the Bay Area 12%
No 73%
bers) the synagogue’s warm and friendly atmosphere (which was very important for 34% and important for 56%). (See Figure 5.)

New members were asked to rank their top three reasons for joining TEE. The voluntary dues policies was the top-ranked reason for new members. Twenty-seven percent (27%) of new members reported that the voluntary dues policy was the most important reason for joining. (See Figure 6.)

Focus group participants confirmed the importance of cost as a barrier to joining a synagogue, and the critical role of the voluntary dues policy in their decision to join TEE. This factor seemed most important for single individuals, especially younger ones. One single woman in her 30s explained that she had not joined a synagogue prior to joining TEE because: “I was on my own, I was alone. I didn’t have the money to even join.” Another single woman in her 30s stated that cost is “a huge reason for me because money just is not plentiful and so it was really a great thing to be able to do it on a voluntary basis.”

Cost and New Members’ Priorities
Individuals do not weigh the issue of cost in isolation from other factors. Judging by the household income data, many of the new members most likely could afford to

![Figure 4: Importance of Cost in Not Joining a Synagogue](chart.png)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Importance Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not at All Important</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Very Important</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Important</td>
<td>44%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Don't Know</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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join a synagogue and pay full dues. However, some new members tend to calculate the cost of joining a synagogue in terms of other priorities in their lives. New members, most of whom have little or no previous experience with synagogues as adults, want to know what they would be getting in return for paying for synagogue membership. These individuals value the voluntary dues policy because it enables them to get a sense of what synagogue life is like before committing to paying what they consider to be a large sum of money for membership. For example, one married man, a professional in his 60s, stated: "The dues to join a synagogue are around $1,200, which is a fair amount of money. It is not $100. It's $1,200. And I don't know what the $1,200 is for. What do I get out of it? That was my motivation to join here or Sherith Israel. It is a large investment and we go to shul occasionally. We enjoy it when we go, but there is not a driving force of any sort. So we're sort of on the edge, and it was a monetary thing. There is no question about it. I'm not willing to put up $1,200 for something I really don't know anything about...I'm expecting to get positive results out of this. And the freebie is the thing that allowed it to happen. I was not willing to commit money when I didn't know what was being offered." A single woman in her late 40s indicated that the cost of membership was high because it was not one of her top priorities: "I knew that I wanted to belong to a temple, but in my life right now...I'm not very wealthy and this is not a priority, you know, to spend $300 or $400 to join a temple. I don't know that it is a priority for me in my life right now...it was definitely the money and this just is not on top of my priority list."

Cost and Reducing the Fear of Commitment
Many focus group members reported that the voluntary dues policy felt welcoming because it reduced their fear of being asked to make commitments to the synagogue that they did not initially feel comfortable making. To these individuals, the voluntary dues policy invites new members to get involved at their own pace rather than to meet expectations created by the synagogue's leadership or other congregants. One woman, a divorced empty nester, stated that: "I think synagogues have always been rigid. It's not been an open place where people can just come together and not feel intimidated that, 'Uh-oh, they're going to ask me to do something now,' or 'They're going to ask me to pay dues,' or 'They are going to ask me...because a lot of people will go, 'I don't want to do that.' But they might if you gently push them into it."

Other participants confirmed this woman's observation. A single woman in her mid 20s who recently moved to San Francisco said that the voluntary dues policy "definitely just made me feel more comfortable. I didn't feel any sort of pressure. I just felt welcome...I just felt like it wasn't going to be hard...Having a voluntary dues program just made me feel like it could kind of be there for me. And I could use the temple as I wanted to—as much as I wanted to or as little."
Cost and Single People
Younger, single people especially valued the message of welcome that they believe the voluntary dues policy conveyed. As one single woman in her 30s put it: “I didn’t feel connected to the Jewish community. I was disconnected and I didn’t know how to connect up and because of what Emanu-El did, it really helped me say yes to wanting to connect—offering the voluntary [dues] membership. You didn’t feel so threatened. It felt like they were opening up their doors to come. It actually opened a door basically. They were looking for me, otherwise you’ve got to look for yourself and, being single, you’re not really wanting to do that.”
Another single woman in her 30s agreed that the voluntary dues policy made her “feel like someone was really opening a door and reaching out a hand...I always thought it was something like, okay, you get married, you have a family and then there’s like enough of an income that you then join a temple. I’m single and I just never thought that it was anything that I could afford or want because I always had this image that it’s just families.”

The Voluntary Dues Policy and TEE’s Efforts at Welcoming New Members
The focus groups make it clear that the impact of the voluntary dues policy must be considered in relation to other efforts that TEE has made to welcome new members. Prospective or new members’ feelings toward the synagogue are decisively shaped by their initial experiences at TEE. The voluntary dues policy may lead individuals to seek out the synagogue, but these individuals report that the way that they are treated once they begin interacting with the rabbis and staff is extremely important to them. The focus group participants praised TEE’s reception of new members. For example, one man in his 60s marveled at the rabbis’ welcoming attitude: “He [Rabbi Wolf-Prusan] made it easy for me. ‘Come, try it. If you don’t like it, go somewhere else. Try it.’ There were no demands on me and that’s what I liked about it.” Rabbi Pearce also smoothed this man’s entry into synagogue life: “I think an awful lot of [Rabbi Pearce]. He shook my hand. He shook my wife’s hand. He welcomed us and...asked if there were any problems. I asked him if I could come see him some day just to talk philosophically. ‘Absolutely, no problem.’ He wanted me to be there and he was extending himself, and I think an awful lot of him. I think this has a lot to do with the feel of being drawn into this place.”
New members report that the synagogue has also helped welcome them by demonstrating its interest in new members’ needs and opinions. The work of the membership director and program director were singled out for special mention. One woman in her 30s stated: “I think that what I’ve gotten so far has been above and beyond what I expected from a temple. To fill out a survey and have somebody call you back and say, ‘Oh, I saw that you checked this, this, this, and this, let’s talk about it.’ I was like, ‘Oh, my God, it’s so great.’” Another woman in her mid 20s said: “They’ve been really good here about just like gently pulling me in kind of. First the letters,
Kippur and Rosh Hashanah tickets, separate tickets from membership at my temple. And I just remember it saying in the Haggada, ‘All who are hungry come and eat.’ It bothered me that this synagogue wasn’t just a place you could walk into because you wanted to pray. It never felt that way to me at home. And that’s what I envisioned a place of worship should be, just a place that you feel like you need to pray, or be closer to God, or whatever it is and you can just walk in the door and that place never felt that way to me, and this place feels a lot like it. Temple Emanu-El is a huge kind of intimidating looking place, but it does feel to me like a place I could just go, not that I’m inclined to be that way, but that someone could say, ‘I want to worship,’ and could walk in the door.

That sort of gets back to what I think the synagogue was meant to be from the beginning of time.” A woman in her 50s agreed: “If a Jew comes to a place and wants to pray, that Jew should be able to go into a temple and pray and not have them say ‘Where’s the cash?’...The idea that you would welcome new members without them first showing their green, I thought was very generous and was in sync with my idea of what a synagogue and a temple and a house of worship should be—which is open.”

**Beyond the Voluntary Dues Policy**

New members spoke about what they felt would lead them to retain their membership at TEE after the initial year of voluntary dues. Most believe that they will remain members if the synagogue provides them with valued services and experiences. Several individuals indicated that their experiences at TEE to date have persuaded them to renew their membership after the first year.

**Cost**

Most new members indicate that they will pay dues after the first year if the synagogue is meeting their needs. One woman stated: “If you are happy with what the temple is giving you...then you’re feeling: ‘I will make this work. I will make this cost work because it’s really the place that I want to be.’” A man agreed: “If you feel more comfortable coming to a place, you might be willing to pay a little bit more to come instead of trying to start new every time that you do something.” Another man stated: “The financial thing comes into the picture, but I guess we are going to see after one year how we feel about the services or the programs that they have around here, after this year see how we feel about it. We’re going to ask a lot of questions as far as the synagogue goes.”

One woman did express serious reservations about her ability to pay after the first year: “A big issue is what is it going to cost? I definitely want to stay. I really like the concept of belonging, but I don’t know what it will cost. It could be way above my means.”

However, other participants expressed the hope that they could make payment plans consistent with their ability to pay. One woman stated: “At the end of the
everybody took care of you and it was so great to walk in here and just go up to Jackie and go, ‘Hi, I just moved here,’ and Jackie made me feel like I was back in school and that there was somebody to take care of me. So I felt like I had a community and just people who would help me just because I was there, and Jewish, and a member. That was such a great feeling in a city where I didn't know anything or anybody. It sort of became home, so I'll stay forever. I'm hooked.”
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