

CONVERSION AS A LIFE CYCLE EVENT

Name of congregation: Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel
Address: 8339 Old York Road
Elkins Park, PA 19027
Phone: (215) 887-8702
Number of members: 1,500
UAHC region: Pennsylvania Council
Rabbi: Joseph M. Forman
Outreach Chair: Dr. Christina Ager

Brief description: Introduce conversion into the religious school curriculum as a life cycle event, engaging 5th & 6th graders and their parents.

Program goals:

1. To introduce conversion to our school-age population as a normative life-cycle event, so that it may become a part of our students' vocabulary throughout their lives and positively affect their attitudes toward conversion and Jews-by-choice.
2. To expose students to the Reform Jewish attitude towards conversion and those choosing Judaism, to help young Jews become more familiar with the process and rituals of conversion, and to gain understanding of the motivations leading an individual to choose Judaism.
3. To have students attend a conversion ceremony.

Target population: 5th & 6th graders and parents

Number of participants: 100 students, 30 parents

Number & length of sessions: Seven

- Classroom instruction - 1 hour
- Session with rabbi - 1 hour
- Session with rabbi - 1 hour
- Shabbat morning dialogue - 1 hour
- Classroom activity - ½ hour
- Question & answer session, conversion ceremony - 1 hour
- Follow-up with rabbi - 1 hour

(Planned for next year is field trip to local Reform *Mikvah* - ½ day)

Staffing required: Religious School teachers for 5th & 6th grades, rabbi, cantor, educator, conversion candidate

Total cost of program: None

Fee for attendees: None

Logistics: Classrooms; space for meeting with all 5th & 6th graders and parents; chapel for conversion ceremony.

Instructions to facilitator: See attached curriculum

Evaluation of program: While there has been no formal evaluation of this program, several events occurred as it unfolded, indicating its impact upon students, parents, and faculty. Increased awareness of the process of conversion and the welcoming attitude of the Reform Movement was clearly shown during a follow-up session with the rabbi. Furthermore, two students remarked that they now had a greater understanding of their parents' decision to convert and could imagine how they might have felt at the ceremony. Following the conversion, one parent remarked, "Next year will be my year." And a 6th grade teacher chose to share her mother's conversion story with her students. Together these stories reveal that presenting conversion as a normative life-cycle event can positively affect our community's attitudes toward conversion and toward those who chose Judaism.

Follow-up: See attached curriculum, Session #7

CURRICULUM

1. Religious School instructors introduce the concept of conversion within a classroom environment with a focus on the various rituals that are part of conversion .
2. First meeting with the rabbi.
To assess knowledge base and to motivate the thinking of students, rabbi asks the following questions:
 - 1) Whose family has parents with different religious backgrounds?
 - 2) Who knows a Jew-by-choice?
 - 3) Why do you think some people choose to convert to Judaism?
 - 4) What do you know about the process and the ceremony of conversion?After students respond the rabbi elicits questions that students have about motivations, the ceremony and the process of conversion. (See addendum to session #2)
3. Second meeting with the rabbi, two weeks later.
Using the students' questions as a guide, the rabbi explains in detail the entire process of conversion, thereby preparing them for the ceremony they will attend.
Special emphasis is placed on creating empathy and compassion for the convert, and students are encouraged to explore ways in which they might welcome new Jews-by-choice into the community. (This activity prepared our students to write welcoming messages the following Sunday morning.)
4. Saturday morning interactive dialogue with 5th & 6th graders and their parents.
Educator discusses Torah portion with students and their parents.
At our program the educator focused on ritual in *Parashat Shemini* as a way to explore the theme of Jewish identity and "Who is a Jew?"
5. Sunday morning 9:30-10:00 a.m., religious school teachers in classrooms help students create a welcome card with individual personal messages for the convert.
6. Sunday morning 10:00-11:00 a.m.
 - 1) Question and answer period with students and convert in Chapel. (Though originally planned only for convert, the mother and grandmother of convert also participated.)
 - 2) Conversion ceremony with rabbi and cantor. (Educator was present at *mikvah*.)
 - 3) Presentation of welcome card from students.
 - 4) Group singing of *Shehecheyanu*.
7. Follow-up: Rabbi meets with students to explore their reactions and to determine what they learned from the experience. Rabbi also leads discussion on Reform Jewish Outreach. (See addendum to session #7)

*****Teachers should please refer to the following teacher resource and curriculum materials:**

Kadden, Barbara Binder and Kadden, Bruce. *Teaching Jewish Life Cycle, Traditions and Activities*. Denver, CO: A.R.E. Publishing, Inc., 1997, pp. 43-57.

Schulweis, Harold M. *Finding Each Other in Judaism*. UAHC Press, 2001.
Addendum to Session #2

What students know about conversion:

- swimming, etc.
- read stuff
- explain why want to be Jewish
- learn how to be Jewish
- *Brit Milah*
- declare. "You're a Jew"
- take classes

- read Torah/do stuff
- learning *kashrut*

Questions students asked:

1. *Mikvah*:
 - What's a *mikvah*?
 - Must you go to *mikvah*?
 - Where is there a *mikvah*? Is there one at K.I.?
 - Why do they go in the bath?
 - What does it look like? How big is the bath?
2. Ceremony:
 - What do you have to do?
 - Do you need a Rabbi?
 - Do you have to dress up? What should you wear to conversion?
 - What objects are involved?
 - Why must you have ceremony? Where does the service take place? Do we do it at K.I.?
 - What is ceremony like? Is it big? Are there special prayers? Who is at conversion? Who is invited?
 - Must you convert in a Temple?
3. Preparation for ceremony:
 - Do you have to read from the Torah?
 - Male? Female? Is the process different for males and females?
 - Does it cost money?
 - Is there a difference between Reform and Orthodox conversions? Is conversion today different than it was long ago?
 - How long does it take to prepare for the ceremony? How long is the ceremony?
 - What questions do the rabbis ask of the candidate?
 - Do people converting learn what we learn in Sunday School? Is there a special place to study?
 - How much do you have to learn before conversion?
 - Do you need to learn Hebrew to convert?
4. Why:
 - Why is it a "big deal"?
 - Why convert? Can't you think of yourself as Jew without the ceremony?
 - If you marry a Jew, do you have to convert, or can you just be Jewish?
5. Age requirements:
 - Can anyone convert?
 - How old do you have to be to convert or attend a conversion?
 - How do babies convert? Can babies convert?
 - Do parents have to give their permission if a child wants to convert?
6. Privileges:
 - If you convert before your Bar/Bat mitzvah, can you have still one?
 - Are there special privileges that you get when you convert?
 - Do you get a Hebrew name?
 - Do converts have the same rights as born Jews?

7

Comparison to other religions:

- Can you really convert and change religions?
- Do religions scold you for converting out?
- If you convert out of Christianity, do Christians believe that you are going to hell?
- Do different religions have different laws for conversion?
- Is the conversion process the same for all religions?
- What do Jews think of people who convert to Judaism?
- If you convert to Christianity and do something bad, will you go to hell?
- If you convert to Judaism and do something bad will you go to hell?
- Can a Jew convert to Christianity or other religions? Can you convert back to your original religion? Can you return to your original religion if you get divorced?
- Can you convert to atheism? To no religion at all?
- What is Messianic Judaism and can you convert to that religion?
- Can you be two religions at once (be both religions)?
- If a parent converted to Judaism, are the children Jewish?

8.

Miscellaneous:

- What is the origin of the word, "conversion?" How do you say it in Hebrew?
- If a family is not Jewish, but the parents want their kids to be Jewish, can the kids convert even though the parents don't?
- Where in Jewish tradition do we read about the laws of conversion?
- If you once belonged to a cult and did things against the beliefs of Judaism, can you still convert?
- What happens if someone dies mid-way through preparation for conversion? Do they die a Jew?
- What if your parents or family have a problem with your conversion?