MENTORING WITH MENSCHLICHKEIT:
HOW TO IMPLEMENT AN OUTREACH MENTORING PROGRAM
IN A SMALL CONGREGATION

Name of Congregation: Temple Beth-El
Address: P.O. Box 1029
Las Cruces, NM 88004-1029
Phone Number: (505) 524-3380
Number of Member Units: 144
UAHC Region: Pacific Southwest Council
Rabbi: Gerald M. Kane
Outreach Chair: Charlotte Jones

Brief Description: A small congregation is presented with a unique set of challenges when it comes to integrating new Jews-by-choice, interfaith couples, Jews returning to their faith, families relocating to a smaller Jewish community, or any combination of these into the fabric of Jewish communal life.

Our community, Las Cruces, New Mexico, on the New Mexico/Texas border, fifty miles from our next largest city, El Paso, could easily present barriers to those thinking about involving themselves in the Jewish community. Rather than commit to involvement in Las Cruces Jewish life, it is easy for individuals and families to assimilate and blend into the amorphous mainstream.

Temple Beth-El in Las Cruces, New Mexico, founded in 1956, is addressing the potential obstacles of integrating newcomers into our isolated, yet established, active, and diverse Jewish community. With the assistance of Arlene Chernow, UAHC Outreach and Synagogue Community Director of the Pacific Southwest Region, Temple Beth El has adapted and fine-tuned the Region's Conversion Mentoring program to better meet our specific needs and build our membership as we prepare to build a new facility and move into the twenty-first century.

Program Goals:
• To train designated Outreach Mentors to follow-up on practical conversion/community integration issues
• To sensitize Temple members to become more welcoming to newcomers who are potential Temple members
• To make potential Temple members more comfortable with the Jewish community, more familiar with our local and regional customs and ceremonies as well as more aware of practical Jewish resources.

Target Populations:
• Potential newcomers to the community
• Newcomers (interfaith families as well as retirees and young families)
• Potential Jews-by-choice
• Members of the congregation who have potential to become future mentors
• Members who need to become more sensitive to newcomers
• Potential members residing in the community who have dropped Temple membership for any number of reasons, and who we are eager to have return to a “warmer and more welcoming” congregation than the one they left

Number of Participants: 18 trained mentors, 36 individuals / potential members, 75 “active” members- influenced by involvement by Rabbi and mentors.

Number and Length of Sessions: Six hour initial Mentor Training session- including Shabbat worship and lunch, individual update conferences with mentors as needed, two hour “Reunion” / update session with Regional Director / Rabbi (Shabbat dinner at the Rabbi’s home).

Staffing Required: Rabbi and Regional Outreach Director

Total Cost of Program: None- except for incidental copying / food costs.

Source of Funding: Rabbi’s Discretionary Fund and 2001 Belin Outreach Award.

Fee for Attendees: None

Logistics:
• A group of eighteen mentors representing a variety of family situations (interfaith couples, singles, gay/lesbian couples, retirees) was selected by the Rabbi and invited to attend an Outreach Mentor Training session together with mentors from our sister congregation in El Paso. Participation in this workshop made our mentors feel that they were special and a part of a larger community. At the orientation session conducted by our Regional Outreach Director, mentors were presented with copies of the “Conversion Mentoring Handbook.”
• During the training session we realized the need to develop, expand and refine issues and strategies unique to our congregation and community.
• We recognized that because relationships in a small congregation are less formal, they could be far more significant than in a larger community.
• We expanded the concept of Conversion Mentoring as presented in the Handbook to include newcomers and returning members in addition to interfaith couples and Jews-by-choice.
• Because of the informality of our congregation, additional modifications were necessary. For instance, we do not have a Shabbat dinner to introduce mentors and new Jews-by-choice. Neither do we limit the pairing to new Jews-by-choice. Pairings are made at different points in each person’s journey according to need and personal history of each individual or family, instead of at the formal end of the Introduction to Judaism program as outlined in the Mentoring Handbook.
• Because the pool of potential converts is smaller, formal Introduction to Judaism classes are not scheduled. “A Taste of Judaism” is offered once each year. The rabbi
offers one-on-one conversion training. If not already assigned, a mentor is often matched and assigned to deal with practical issues during the Rabbi's conversion sessions.

- Mentor pairings are usually established when newcomers (to Judaism and the community) arrive at services for the first time. Mentors make themselves available to answer specific and practical questions and introduce newcomers to other members of the community. Because celebrating Jewish life in a smaller community is more challenging during holidays such as Chanukah, Passover and the High Holy Days, mentors are encouraged to invite newcomers to join with them for holiday observances.
- The rabbi knows all member families and quickly gets to know all interested and new individuals and families. Often he receives phone calls and e-mails from potential newcomers. If he knows that a family/individual/couple will be visiting on a particular Shabbat, he alerts on of the mentors to be available. He is sensitive to the struggles of new Jews-by-choice and encourages trained designated Jews-by-choice to "befriend" new Jews-by-choice and help them to learn how to love a Jewish life and learn the skills of living Jewishly.
- The rabbi knows interfaith families/members who have relocated from similar parts of the country/families with children the same age and pairs them in a similar fashion.
- Specific details must be withheld to protect the confidentiality of certain paired situations. Suffice to say that such pairings have reaped many positive results. Individuals have discussed anxieties, shared common family crises, served as sounding boards for newcomers to Judaism and provided comfort and encouragement when needed.
- As the relationships with mentors evolve, individuals/couples/families are invited to mentors' homes for Shabbat dinners and holiday celebrations.
- Shopping trips are planned to the local stores or to the nearest large town (El Paso, TX) to visit nearby synagogues, purchase food supplies for holiday preparations. All mentoring pairs are encouraged to participate.
- Individuals are encouraged by the rabbi and their mentors to attend special Temple events such as weekly worship and Talmud Study, holiday events such as the Women's Tu B'Shevat seder and the second night community Seder.
- Mentors frequently check in with the rabbi to provide an update on individual cases.
- Twice a year the rabbi hosts a round table for mentors to share strategies and evaluate the program.
- The rabbi keeps mentors apprised with updates he discovers on the Internet.

Instructions to Facilitator: Any rabbi/congregational Outreach chair can implement this program with assistance from the Regional Outreach Director to validate and fine-tune the Outreach activities. Sensitivity and flexibility are necessary in selecting a variety of mentors. Accessibility to mentors and potential congregants is essential.

Evaluation of Program: While not directly responsible for a very slight increase in membership, this initiative may be responsible for maintaining and growing our congregation's membership. Members feel especially valued and empowered. None have
asked to be removed from the program. The welcoming of newcomers at each week’s worship service provides focus for mentors and other congregants.

**Follow-up:** “After-Taste” follow-up sessions are offered for potential converts, new congregants, and interested members of the congregation over the course of the year. These are usually tied in to holiday preparations and observances. (See “Pleasant After-Tastes” in *Reform Jewish Outreach: The 2002 Idea Book*.)

Without large numbers of individuals converting each year, a carefully developed mentoring program becomes even more critical. This program teaches our members to become teacher and role models. It often invigorates their commitment to Jewish life, so it can be considered a win/win program for both newcomers as well as established members of the congregation.