Chapter Three:
Supporting and Mentoring Jews-by-Choice and Their Families

The mitzvah of *keruv* (drawing near those who are far) means welcoming not only Jewish newcomers and interfaith families, it means embracing *gerim* (Jews-by-choice). Conversion is a significant life-cycle event for many contemporary Jews, and Jews-by-choice and their families need our support before, during and after the process of conversion. The wide variety of creative programs in this chapter demonstrates many effective ways to educate those choosing Judaism about Jewish tradition and community, to support their partners and families, and to help synagogue members understand both the process itself and the Jewish values embedded in welcoming new Jews.

Temple Beth El (Charlotte, NC) successfully created the Merkin Interfaith Institute, securing funding that enabled them to hire a full-time Interfaith and Outreach Coordinator to create effective Outreach programs and resources for their synagogue. Among those presented here are a brochure on conversion, a wonderful mentoring program for Jews-by-choice, ideas for bulletin articles, and effective strategies for follow-up with participants. Each can easily be adapted regardless of congregational size or budget.

What part does the Jewish partner play in the process of conversion? What challenges does she face when someone she loves converts and how can congregations support and involve Jews as they become Partners on the Path to Judaism? Congregation Emeth (Gilroy, CA) offers a wonderful 4-session program for “Jewish partners only” that uses text to explore the unique issues and personal challenges participants may face when their partner converts.

Using the congregational bulletin as a way to educate members about conversion and to honor Jews-by-choice by enabling them to share their Jewish Journeys is an ongoing project of Shir Ha-Ma’alot (Irvine, CA). Each month a different congregant, some born Jewish, some Jews-by-choice, is invited to share his/her experience of choosing Judaism.

Mentoring With Menschlichkeit, is a program developed by Temple Beth-El, (Las Cruces, NM) to educate and train synagogue members to mentor and support new interfaith couples and those in the process of conversion. The goal is to help new and potential temple members to become more integrated and comfortable in the synagogue. Temple Beth-El, a small congregation, has created a four-session program that enlists temple members to help address the obstacles and challenges that newcomers face as they try to find their place in our community.
MERKIN INTERFAITH INSTITUTE

Name of Congregation: Temple Beth El
Address: 5101 Providence Rd.
Charlotte, NC 28226
Phone Number: (704) 366-1948
Number of member units: 1130
UAHC Region: Mid-Atlantic Council
Rabbis: Rabbi Jim Bennett
Rabbi Judy Schindler
Rabbi Jeremy Barras
Outreach chairperson: Mara Gose, Chair
Stephanie DiPaolo, Interfaith & Outreach Coordinator

Brief Description: In response to the large number of non-Jewish members of our congregation, the Merkin Outreach Institute was created to enhance the work of our Interfaith and Outreach committee. Through the Institute we have created the following programs:

- A brochure tailored for Temple Beth El, which presents conversion at our synagogue.
- A conversion support group that facilitates the discussion of interpersonal issues four times a year.
- A mentoring program which pairs our prospective Jews-by-choice with a Jewishly committed family or individual. This program supports those on the conversion track by enabling them to have questions answered and to participate in Jewish rituals in a home environment. A brochure is being created to explain the mentoring program for conversion students as well as those interested in mentoring.
- Expanded Introduction to Judaism courses. Our courses are now offered three times a year and have been expanded from 10 to 12 weeks, which gives potential conversion students more time for study.
- The hiring of an Interfaith and Outreach Coordinator who:
  - Maintains files of all conversion students
  - Explains the program to interested candidates
  - Provides follow-up with conversion students as they work with clergy
  - Connects with each student four times a year to ensure that Temple Beth El is meeting their needs and offering the best program possible
  - Works with the Interfaith and Outreach committee to develop and support programming
  - Calls to welcome new interfaith members to the Temple, and informs them of programs the committee offers
  - Writes “Conversations on Conversion,” which are reflections from Jews-by-choice on their journey published in our monthly Temple Bulletin.
Coordinates “A Learner’s Shabbat,” which provides a learner’s service and speaker on a topic related to outreach.

**Program Goal:** To provide more opportunities for learning and participation for the many non-Jews, interfaith families, and prospective Jews-by-choice in our community through creation of a staff position whose primary role would be to enhance Outreach.

**Target Population:** Interfaith families, Jews-by-choice, and prospective Jews-by-choice in the congregation and community

- **Number of Participants:** N/A
- **Number and Length of Session:** N/A
- **Staffing Required:** Interfaith & Outreach Coordinator
- **Total Cost of Program:** $16,000
- **Source of Funding:** Grant