CONVERSION SEMINAR AND HAVDALAH SERVICE

Name of Congregation: Beth El Hebrew Congregation
Address: 3830 Seminary Road
   Alexandria, VA 22304
Phone Number: (703) 370-9400
Number of Members: Approximately 840
UAHC Region: Mid Atlantic Council
Rabbis: Arnold G. Fink and Jonathan Biatch
Outreach chairperson: James C. Myska

Brief Description: An initial, informational meeting for people considering conversion (and their partners) consisting of dinner, followed by a talk explaining the conversion process, a brief talk about the issues that can arise in a relationship between a born Jew and a Jew-by-choice, a frank and open question and answer period, ending with a creative Havdalah service.

Program Goal: Explain what is involved in converting to Judaism, discuss the issues that can arise between a convert and a born Jew, answer questions in an open and comfortable setting, and expose participants to a bit of Jewish practice, the Havdalah service.

Target Population: Those exploring/entering into the conversion process and their families.

Number of participants: Six at the most recent event.

Number and Length of Session: One session, 2 hours

Staffing Required: 1 Outreach person, a rabbi, and a cantor (though we used 3 Outreach folks)

Total Cost of Program: About $70

Source of Funding: Outreach budget

Fee for Attendees: $10

Logistics: Provide handout packet and copy of Havdalah service for attendees and an evaluation survey. Set up the room with a table for serving food, tables set up in a "U" for the participants and event leaders, and a dairy/parve dinner. Publicity included articles in the Beth El Bulletin, postings on the Beth El listserv and web site, postings to the listserv of a Beth El-affiliated young professionals' group, a poster in the entrance foyer, and phone calls to each conversion candidate and potential candidate from the rabbis' lists. Publicity was short, explaining the event and giving directions on how to register.
**Instructions to Facilitator:** The whole purpose of this event is first to explain the conversion process thoroughly and second to give interested participants a chance to ask questions of 1) someone who has been through the process themselves and 2) the born Jew whose partner has completed conversion. These two personal perspectives are necessary. These 2 speakers can be partners with one another or may be partnered with someone else. The important element here is the examination of the relationship between a convert and a born Jew. We chose people who didn’t have a lot of “baggage”—who felt comfortable telling their stories and could be honest about their reactions and experiences with one another during the process.

This program requires an open, comfortable atmosphere. There can be tensions in the audience and we want to try to help ease them. This is a very simple program to set up and run. Our rabbi did the presentation piece on the process and ritual of conversion, but a speaker who is very knowledgeable about the conversion process and ritual could also be used. It is important to have a rabbi there to answer any Jewishly complex questions that may arise.

The cantor provides musical accompaniment for the Havdalah service.

**Evaluation of Program:** We have run this program twice, last year and this year. Both times the feedback has been very strongly positive, with remarks like, "this is just what is needed." We know that it has made a decisively positive difference to many of the attendees, who have subsequently entered the conversion process.

**Follow-up:** Follow-up is intentionally limited. We distribute a survey to evaluate the event and allow people to give us their contact information for our contact list. We aren't any more aggressive than that because we realize this is a very sensitive topic. We just make ourselves available.