

## **In the Beginning** by Noni Selner

Several years after I was married, my husband, a Jew by birth, and I, a non-Jew, joined Temple Israel. In 1970-71 I began several months of in-depth “one-on-one” Judaic study sessions with Cantor Manford Kuttner. Later I entered the “studies in Judaism” classes that were conducted by Rabbi Sidney Brooks, Rabbi Barry Weinstein, and Jane Brooks. These classes were designed to further the understanding of Jewish thought and practice and to discuss comparisons with Christianity. My husband was required to attend the same sessions. After completion of the studies, I chose to become Jewish and had a conversion ceremony here. The professional staff was extremely warm, encouraging and accepting of members like me.

There was no formal Outreach program here, and, in spite of the well-meaning efforts of my husband and his family, I felt much like a stranger in a foreign land. I was most fortunate to be approached by a couple of faithful Sisterhood members one day when I was in the building and was invited to join Sisterhood where I was very quickly integrated into the practices of Jewish life in the Temple, home and the Jewish and non-Jewish community. The members, most of whom were Jews by birth, welcomed me enthusiastically and put me to work!

In the Spring of 1981 our Rabbis started a program for inter-faith couples who were members of our congregation. At the same time, our Sisterhood was trying different informal programs to integrate Jews by Choice and their families into Jewish life. We recognized that we needed a program that would encompass everyone, in spite of the fact that we were all working together.

At National Sisterhood convention we were introduced to a program which was called the “Link” program. Our Sisterhood brought Judith Kane, originator of the program, to spend a weekend here at our Temple in November, 1982, and explain this program to our congregation. Judith, a member of Mt. Zion Temple in St. Paul, Minnesota, was a “grass-roots” member of the UAHC Outreach program. The theme was “Relating to the New Jew – A Matter of Understanding and Acceptance.” Jews by Choice, non-Jewish spouses, new congregational members, were linked to members who were willing to meet them at services, acquaint them with our Temple, invite them into their homes, etc. Rabbi Weinstein worked closely with our Sisterhood members to link members appropriately. The program was successful at first, then ultimately our congregational Outreach program was implemented. By that time, at least 14 years after I had converted, I had had the special privilege to work on Outreach on the District, Regional and National level and was part of the original UAHC “Think Tank” group. I am very grateful to belong to a congregation that has embraced me as a Jew from the beginning!