AN ADMINISTRATOR LOOKS AT OUTREACH

Serane Blatt  
Executive Director  
Temple Judea Mizpah  
8610 Niles Center Road  
Skokie, Illinois 60077
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1. "On December 2, 1978, Rabbi Alexander Schindler, President of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations called upon the Board of Trustees to establish a program of Outreach which would develop responses to the needs of individuals converting to Judaism, intermarried couples, children of intermarriages and those interested in learning about Judaism.

Reform Jewish Outreach is a program which aims to: Welcome those who seek to investigate Judaism; Integrate Jews-by-Choice fully into the Jewish community; encourage them to affiliate with a congregation; Meet the needs of intermarried couples, and encourage them to affiliate with a congregation; Educate and sensitize the Jewish community to be receptive to new Jews-by-Choice and intermarried couples; Encourage people to make Jewish choices in their lives through special discussion groups, community support, adult education and availability of Jewish resources; Assist young people in strengthening their Jewish identity and in examining the implications of interdating and intermarriage for themselves".

This paper will address the role of the Temple Administrator in reference to the UAHC Outreach program.

The Temple Administrator is usually the first contact with most individuals and families. One of the many varied responsibilities of the administrator is to be sensitive to the special needs of each and every congregant, however particular attention should be given to those who are new to Judaism or those contemplating Judaism or in a mixed marriage.

Prior to my present position, I served as the Outreach Coordinator of the Great Lakes Region of the UAHC. I was fortunate to have had extensive training in Outreach under the direction of Lydia Kukoff, UAHC Outreach Director.

I have been the administrator of Temple Judea Mizpah, a 500 family Reform
Congregation in Skokie, Illinois for the past five years. About one-third of our member families are in an intermarriage. Many times over the five years I have heard, "You don't understand, we want to join your congregation, but our family is different because my spouse isn't Jewish." When I assure the prospective member that at least one third of the families in our religious school are in mixed marriages, I always hear a sigh of relief. These families have made a difficult and emotional decision and are fearful that they, and their children won't be accepted. They, like every other new member of a congregation feel that all the other members know each other and are friends. This, of course, is untrue. They also have the feeling that the non-Jewish partner will feel out of place in a synagogue. They are unaware of the reality that many people born to Judaism have never really attended services and feel just as uncomfortable.

I instruct my staff to be sensitive to callers asking about membership. It is important to have good telephone skills when answering the phone for every caller, however when an individual in an intermarriage calls, it usually is with great trepidation. One wrong word can be a tremendous letdown.

Intermarried families having made the decision to raise their children as Jews join a synagogue often when their children are younger than families where both partners are born to Judaism. The Jewish parent feels a deeper need to identify closely with the temple.

Many families tell me of their fear that the non-Jewish spouse will feel alienated from their wives/husbands and children. The concern is that the non-Jewish spouse becomes an observer rather than a participant.

Many prospective members make inquiries as to the nature of synagogue life such as: How much Hebrew is in the service? Can a non-Jew participate at Friday night services? How much can a non-Jewish parent participate in life cycle
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events? Each question must be carefully answered. The answers will vary in each congregation based on the by-laws of that congregation. At our congregation, a non-Jew can be on the Board of Directors, an officer of the congregation except president, a member of one of the six committees and an active member in each of our auxiliaries. He or she can participate in most life cycle events and religious services. The non-Jew, however, cannot carry the Torah during a service or make a blessing over the wine.

Once an intermarried family or Jew-by-Choice becomes a member it is important to integrate them into the congregation. Many times the Jewish partner will ask to join in his or her own name. I always try to encourage family membership, yet will never try to force it. A few years ago, a lovely young woman nervously came into my office to inquire about membership. Judy had one child and another on the way. She said if she joined, she only wanted membership in her name. When I asked if her husband would be unhappy receiving mail from a synagogue with his name on it, she hesitated and then responded that she didn’t know. She just assumed it would bother him. We discussed this further and she promised to go home and ask her husband how he would feel about this. The next day Judy called to say her husband would be thrilled to be included in the membership. He was just afraid to ask because he felt he would be rejected. This family now participates in our young family pot-luck dinners and recently had their new baby named in the sanctuary.

Three years ago the Membership Vice President and I developed a Host Family Program. When new member joins the congregation, I tell them that they will be linked to an existing member who may have similar family interests, children of the same age, similar occupations, or in the case of an intermarriage may also be intermarried. I ask them if this would be comfortable for them. In every case,
the response is always positive. I then call existing members and tell them the names and backgrounds of their host families. At the beginning of every year, we have an orientation meeting with the host, the Rabbi, Membership Vice President and me. We ask the host family to invite their new family for a Shabbat dinner and then bring them to services.

In November, our congregation holds a new member dinner and we ask the host families to invite their new member families to this dinner. It is wonderful to see the new relationships develop and to see people who are unfamiliar with Judaism begin to feel more comfortable both at services and during social events.

During the winter months we have a havdallah service, coupled with and ice-cream social and a Jewish experiential activity. This last year our activity was designing a Magen David with the family's picture in the center, favorite Jewish food in one triangle, favorite Jewish holiday in another, favorite family activity, favorite sport, favorite TV show and hobby in last. This activity ties Jewish and secular life together. It, along with all the Host Family activities moves towards families not only learning about Judaism, but "living" Judaism.

Members are invited each year to an Outreach Program facilitated by the rabbi and me. This program last year was conducted before Passover. We deliberately didn't have a program before Hannukah and Christmas because we felt that too much has been said about the so called "December Dilemma". We did not want to dwell on the negative.

Several couples attended our session. We talked about feeling comfortable in the synagogue. One woman, a Methodist, said she still had ambiguous feelings about sitting through a Jewish service. Her husband had his own problems because he was raised with a conservative background and since ours is a Reform congregation, he had trouble with that. They, in fact, decided to leave the
congregation for a period of time in order to resolve some of their problems. I recently received a call from them and they are now ready to reaffiliate.

One of the women attended by herself. She is a Jew-by-Choice. Her husband is not interested in attending such a group and she said she didn’t care. She was happy that the congregation offered such a program and she would come alone.

We also discussed the extended families both Jewish and non-Jewish. We emphasized the practicing of one religion in the home, preferably Judaism, but encourage the families to visit and celebrate non-Jewish holidays in their non-Jewish families' homes. One woman expressed her anger with her mother for sending the children Christmas toys and Easter presents. I asked her if this might be a message from her mother reminding her not to forget her. She appreciated my input and said she would consider that.

One man in the group admitted his wife had forced him to come to the session, but now that he had, he felt good meeting and sharing feelings with other couples in similar positions.

Another man in the group said he is a Lutheran and very observant in his own religion. He had tears in his eyes when he joined the Temple because he never imagined that he would become a member of a Jewish congregation. When he came to the group, he related all of the positive experiences that he had with his wife and children and felt that temple life enriched his family and marriage.

We also have a session for parents of the intermarried. We really discussed many of the same subjects, however, we talked a lot about the grandchildren being raised as Jews. One grandmother cried and said this was something she never discussed with her children because she was afraid of the answer. He daughter was pregnant and she was so afraid of the grandchild being baptized.

This year we'll have a session for parents of intermarried, intermarried
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couples and those contemplating intermarriage. We will show the UAHC film
"Times and Seasons, a Jewish Perspective". After the film, we'll break off into
three separate groups.

Whenever we program for target groups, we always remember to hold separate
programs for Jews-by-Choice, intermarried couples, and parents of intermarried.

Planning the celebration of a Bar or Bat Mitzvah is often an exciting and
yet harrowing experience for most families. Parents born to Judaism usually have
personal experiences from which to draw. Many have friends or relatives who
have planned events and are ready to give advice and assistance. Recently a
mother called my office ostensibly to book a date for her son's Bar Mitzvah. She
sounded very troubled, upset and angry. This mother happens to be a Jew-by-
Choice. After speaking to her for a while, she finally talked about her real
problem. They had no close relatives in the community since her in-laws passed
away and she really didn't know how to go about planning this type of party, one
that would be in good taste and affordable. She did not have a Jewish memory
bank. I gave her several suggestions and promised her that I would be around to
help her as the date approached. We ended the conversation on a happy note.

We recently began a program for adult Bar and Bat Mitzvah or Anshe Mitzvah
as we call it. One of our congregants who happened to be a Jew-by-Choice joined
the class. He said his boys were learning Hebrew and learning about their
Judaism. He wanted to share this learning experience with them. He had a strong
desire to strengthen his Judaism on a personal and family level. Joe has been
Jewish for the past 16 years, but he always felt he didn't know enough about
Judaism to feel comfortable during a service. He and his wife have been active
in the congregation but rarely attended services. Joe was surprised
to find, after attending the first few sessions of the class that many long-time
members of the congregation shared the same insecure feelings about the service. Joe, along with the rest of the class have now completed their two years of study. He not only attends services weekly, but also helps me by checking the sanctuary to make sure that everything is in place for the service. His proudest moment is opening the ark to make sure that everything is right with the Torahs.

Several months ago, a congregant who is also a Jew-by-Choice called to ask where she could buy Shabbat candles. This question prompted the beginning of "How to be Jewish" classes in our congregation. We can never assume that our congregants know about the basics that we take for granted. We are also beginning a parenting center as a special component of our Religious School. We had always held programs and services for families with young children. This Parenting Center will link the Jewish educational process of both parents and pre-school children and will also educate parents on child rearing, health matters, as well as psychological and socialization adjustment.

Publicity for Outreach Programs like publicity for any program must be done in many ways and repeated many times. Besides our monthly and mid-month bulletins, we publicize weekly in our service bulletin. We also use the Bimah to talk about programs. I have found all of these to be effective, but the best publicity is personal calls and word of mouth.

We don't ask if a person is a Jew-by-Choice on our membership applications. We do, however, ask for a Hebrew name and previous congregation affiliation and religious education. Somehow, these questions seem to prompt a response that one spouse is either not Jewish or was not born to Judaism. I keep a running list of these people in my office. It is our policy to allow families to pay a single membership upon request when one partner is not Jewish. Those people too become part of my list. I also ask them at the time if they would be interested
in an Outreach Program.

Once our plans for a program are in place, I personally call each couple and invite them to attend our session. I'll always ask if they want to bring any friends with them, and if they can't attend the immediate program would it be possible to attend another?

The person who holds the key to the door is, of course, the rabbi. The more involvement the rabbi has, the more successful the program. No one person can program alone. With the team effort of rabbi, administrator, educational director and key lay leaders, every member of the congregation can and should feel comfortable. Each member can become an integral part of the temple family and thus, the Jewish community at large.

At one of the past National Association of Temple Administrator's Conferences, Professor Gary Tobin of Brandeis University talked about the rise in intermarriage and the changing family of the 90's. He too felt that the Temple Administrator plays a very important role in the synagogue life of these families.

After that conference, I did a small, random phone survey of my colleagues in the Chicago area. I am proud to say that the majority of administrators in the Chicago area are intelligent, conscientious, caring and sensitive people. I am not proud to report the following responses: "Outreach is not a high interest area", "I don't get involved in that", "The rabbi takes care of that", "The Outreach Committee takes care of that", "I usually push that aside". Many did, however, express an interest in learning more about Outreach and were receptive to in-service training.

We did hold a workshop for the administrators at one of our Chicago Association for Temple Administrators or CATA meetings. Many people were not
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going to attend that meeting because the topic did not apply to them and finally came reluctantly. I acted as the facilitator for this workshop. I used "Times and Season, a Jewish Perspective" as a trigger film. This film depicts several group sessions discussing affective and cognitive aspects of Judaism with couples who were already married or contemplating an intermarriage.

After viewing the film, we talked about some of the problems which arise from an intermarriage. Little by little everyone began to relate personal incidents involving their own families. One of the administrators told some anecdote about her experience with other congregants in her congregation and within a short time, everyone realized how involved they really were in the Outreach program. They just never gave it a name and somehow did not identify their own participation. One of our administrators is now so involved that she is the NATA representative for the National Outreach Commission.

The evaluation of all these programs in the congregation is really two-fold. We always ask for a written evaluation on every program we do. We ask for recommendations for future programming and state that the person need not identify him or herself. But, the true evaluation is in watching the people acclimate, participate and become involved in the congregation. Personal contact was the key in the development and the process and it is the key in the evaluation. Personal follow-up on an ongoing basis in this and any other program is a guarantee of success.