REFLECTIONS OF AN ADMINISTRATOR
IN A SMALL CONGREGATION

by, Steven D. Bram, Senior Member, Executive Director,
Temple Adath Israel, Lexington, Kentucky

Temple Adath Israel never had an Administrator. The con-
gregation has 260 family units. Until 1985, they lacked adequate
funding for such a professional. In addition, there was no per-
ceived need for an Administrator. When the Temple recently reno-
vated its building which is now twice the previous size and realized
in concrete terms its steady increase in membership over the last
twenty years, the congregation decided to expand its staff to include
a full time Administrator because adequate funds were now available.

Temple Adath Israel hired me to be their first Temple Admin-
istrator/Program Director in the summer of 1985. My background in-
cludes a Masters degree in social work, and administrative and program
development in the Jewish Communal Field (i.e. Hillel and J.C.C. work).
While this background helps in some respects, I find aspects of my
responsibilities far greater than my prior experience. I am respon-
sible for the overseeing and maintaining a new Temple building (six
months old when I started to work at the Temple), the supervising
of two custodians, editing the bi-weekly Temple Bulletin, and profes-
sional preparation and monitoring the Temple budget with the treasurer,
the part-time bookkeeper and the budget and finance committee.

When I began my job as administrator, I asked myself why the
Temple would hire an administrator. So many of my projected respon-
sibilities already belonged to various Temple committees and officers.
I quickly learned that a large number of these responsibilities had
fallen through the cracks. No one was fulfilling them. A few examples
were: a.) proofing of all material that leaves the Temple office,
b.) security of the Temple building, c.) the conservation of energy
usage, d.) maintaining and improving office equipment, e.) overseeing
the operation of the Temple office, f.) prompt building maintenance,
g.) coordinating custodial activities for all events held at the Temple,
h.) and encouraging board leadership development. I quickly realized
that these areas needed constant professional oversight. After attending
my first NATA meeting in October, 1985, I realized that what I found was
not unusual. All Temples have these needs. It is how and how well the Temple Administrator meets these needs that is the test of his/her professional ability.

Our Temple has about 260 family units. The programming, counseling, staff responsibilities, and building maintenance needs are many and varied. Ideally, if lay leaders fulfill these functions, there is no need for a full time administrator. Temple Adath Israel has fine lay leadership, but volunteers cannot provide adequate supervision of all details on a daily basis. The administrator, as in a large congregation, provides this daily supervision. He or she can attend to many routine administrative tasks, permitting the rabbi to focus attention on religious programming, counseling, teaching and be the spiritual leader of the congregation.

One often thinks that a congregation of under 300 families can get by without an administrator, but my experience has shown me that without an administrator, the quality of service delivered to the congregant would be much less effective. The administrator knows what is happening in all areas of congregational life, and is a valuable ingredient in the effective functioning of the congregation.

Since there is no Jewish Community Center in Lexington, I was also hired to be a catalyst for new programs that would help the Temple function as a Jewish Community Center. In this role, I developed a Temple Jewish singles' group open to all Lexington area Jewish singles, a performing drama group, and a young couples organization. We also brought in a major speaker, developed a Jewish Family Life series, started a Jewish book discussion group, organized a volleyball team and an International folkdancing class. Many of these programs were organized with the help of congregants, but I as administrator was able to give these programs continuing attention so that they took place as scheduled. I also freed the rabbi from the responsibility for these programs, so that he could concentrate on his primary duties, an important aspect of the role of the administrator as programmer.

When I assumed my job, I found administrative policies to be very haphazard. One of my first tasks was to tighten the functioning of the Temple office and to centralize its operations. I had to become
the clearing center for coordinating diverse activities.

My first year was a learning experience. I believe my social work background was very helpful in relating to congregants and the lay leadership. I developed a survey of congregational needs and started the process of new programming for the Temple. I also discovered that many NATA members have business backgrounds, but it seems to me that persons with social work or Jewish communal work backgrounds can function as administrators equally as well.

As I became more aware of how I could best function in my role in this congregation, I thought it worth looking into how other administrators function in small congregations and see whether there was a common pattern. As I reviewed the 1986 UAHC directory, I found only sixty administrators listed in congregations with 325 or less family units. I sent out surveys to these administrators and I discovered that quite a few of them were really "office managers" and/or "rabbi's secretaries". Of the eleven surveys returned to me, only seven of the respondents were part-time or full-time Temple administrators. Furthermore, completing the survey seemed to serve as a catharsis for these respondents. They appeared eager to share their thoughts regarding Temple administration and appreciated that someone "cared".

The results of the survey reinforced some of my own personal observations after one year in this position. Among them are:

1.) Very few small congregations (under 325) have hired a full-time administrator. The only other full-time administrator who responded to my survey is also the only NATA member of the sixty. We share very similar job responsibilities, Temple operating budgets, and size of Jewish community. On the other hand, the part-time administrators who responded had varied job responsibilities, with no obvious pattern. Each of their congregations seemed to develop job responsibilities for the part-time administrator designed to the particular needs of the
congregation. To my knowledge, there is no congregation listed in the UAHC directory with a full-time administrator with less family units (260) than Temple Adath Israel. It is interesting to note that there are also a sizeable number of Temples with 500 family units or more with no full-time administrator.

2.) Many of the smaller congregations (under 325) meet their administrative needs by hiring a part-time administrator, having the lay leadership fulfill the role, or by having the rabbi and/or secretary assume the administrative functions. This way of meeting needs is not ideal. It overburdens the staff and lay leadership. There is well apt to be administrative chaos, as is often the case in small congregations (under 325) who rely on lay leadership or the rabbi and/or secretary and no administrator because of budget limitation.

3.) Women are more often Temple administrators in small congregations. Most of these positions are part-time, and more women than men are available for such work. In addition, the pay is significantly less than in the larger congregations where administrators are predominately males. Also, comparing the administrators listed in the 1985 UAHC directory with those listed in the 1986 directory, we also see a high rate of turn over in administrators of small congregations. Many of the names in the 1985 directory are not in the 1986 one.

4.) NATA should explore the possibility of part-time professional administrators sharing their expertise with other Jewish organizations in the community, i.e. Jewish Federation, J.C.C., or Hillel, so that one more full-time position can be developed in the Jewish community. This type of position could develop a better salary and higher status for persons serving as part-time Temple administrators.

5.) Close team work between the rabbi and administrator is crucial. The administrator and rabbi can both develop programs. This relationship may need renewed attention.
These are a few insights after one year in this position and from the information gained from my survey. I have come to realize how crucial an administrator is for Temple Adath Israel, for any Temple its size. Such a person provides more quality programming and expanded services for the congregation. The administrator, the rabbi, other staff and committed lay leadership all work together as a team and bring pride of accomplishments.

Steven D. Bram
Administrator
Temple Adath Israel
124 North Ashland Avenue
Lexington, Kentucky 40502-1595