

NEW ROADS TO ENGAGEMENT

A new project from FJMC and Brandeis University looks to lower barriers in synagogue life.

By Michael Brassloff

HOW DOES A CONGREGATION create a truly inclusive community and more fully engage people? How can a congregation become more welcoming and interesting? How does a congregation get to know its members better? These and many other critical questions were addressed during last summer's FJMC biennial convention.

Eighteen three-member teams of rabbis and leaders from various congregations across the country participated in New Roads to Engagement, an exploratory project of the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs and the Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University (CMJS). The partnership combines FJMC's wealth of practical experience and expertise in engaging people and building volunteer commitments and CMJS's extensive experience in conducting

synagogue research and using their findings to understand and influence change.

The goal of the project is to help congregations lower the barriers to participation in synagogue life and raise the level of engagement of all its members. It blends assessment, training, action, and research. It focuses on synagogue policies and practices that affect welcoming and engagement, and on people's thoughts and feelings about the community and their part in it. Findings from the research will have implications for future synagogue policy, practice and programs. It will provide a broad understanding of congregants' relationship to the synagogue in terms of their motivations, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors. It will also offer a sophisticated exploration of the dynamics of change in the synagogue setting.

Prior to the FJMC convention, an initial assessment was carried out by each synagogue's leadership. A board survey provided insight into the members' experiences on the board and their views on their synagogue's strategic priorities, culture and openness to change. A synagogue-wide survey is exploring how members participate in and experience the congregation. Together, these describe the congregation's starting point and

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suggest ways to increase engagement, critical to any planning process.

At the end of the project, the research will again measure perceptions of the congregation to see if and how they have changed. It is hoped the findings will be useful to Conservative congregations more broadly. Research itself is an engagement tool. It asks people to reflect on their experiences.

Project participant Rabbi Jeffrey Abraham, of Congregation Sons of Israel, Upper Nyack, New York, said that the various sessions were "a wonderful experience." He valued the opportunity to delve into ways of engaging regular congregants as well as those on the fringes.

Anne Fassler, president of Congregation Adath Jeshurun, in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, agreed. She believes that engaging in discussions with rabbis and other congregational leaders was especially valuable. Since the program is flexible and synagogue-driven, each synagogue can devise plans suitable to its own circumstances. One of the first steps for Anne's congregation was developing and sending a high holiday mailing enclosure asking congregants to identify their respective interests and talents. The goal is to pair congregants' interests and talents with synagogue activities and events. **CJ**

Michael Brassloff is a past officer of FJMC and a member of the editorial board of CJ: Voices of Conservative/Masorti Judaism.