

Welcoming Work Group Report and Recommendations

Section 1: Background

The Welcoming Work Group (“WWG”) was formed in November 2006, at the direction of the Board of Trustees, to evaluate whether Beth Am is welcoming to all individuals in the Beth Am community. Although Beth Am believes it is a welcoming synagogue, several members raised questions whether we are warm and accepting to all individuals, and whether we are doing as much as possible to be welcoming, consistent with *halakha* and our own traditions. Specifically, the WWG was formed to review this concern and to make recommendations on what changes should be made to ensure Beth Am is sending messages to our community that reflect our beliefs. In this effort the WWG has reviewed Beth Am’s printed materials, website, policies and practices, and hereby reports to the Board of Trustees on our findings and recommendations.

Section 2: Findings

The WWG used several methods to evaluate issues that merit attention. Beyond the first-hand experiences of the WWG members, we conducted outreach to the wider Beth Am community through focus groups, surveys and in-depth interviews; we conducted comparative research on what other UCSJ congregations are doing to promote a welcoming atmosphere; and we read literature on the subject of creating a welcoming Jewish community. Although we have been pleased to find that Beth Am appears to be ahead of the curve among UCSJ synagogues in recognizing the need for a “welcoming” initiative, the WWG has found several areas that should be improved. The recommended improvements are presented below in the Section 3.

Of importance, the WWG’s opinion is that the recommendations do not require changes to Beth Am policies or the Beth Am by-laws. The changes require better communication and implementation of the existing policies. The most central example of a significant change that would not require an amendment of the by-laws is the proposed change to the Dues Structure categories. We received feedback from many individuals that the current Dues Structure description (family membership; parent/child membership; individual membership) is immediately distancing to several individuals in our community (e.g. interfaith households; singles; gay and lesbian partners) because the expression of categories has a pejorative assumption towards traditional Jewish family structure as the Beth Am institutional “norm,” thus indicating that all others are outside that norm. To alleviate this, the WWG is recommending a new Dues Structure that, while tracking to the membership categories in the By-Laws, uses a combination of new descriptions and also a Frequently Asked Question sheet that more fully explains Beth Am philosophy, resources, opportunities and limitations for each person in the Beth Am community. We believe that this change will be appealing to existing and prospective members, and that it better reflects Beth Am’s egalitarian principles.

Beyond the Dues Structure, the WWG also has identified several other changes to our practices and written material that we can take to promote an inclusive atmosphere. Some of these are small steps, but they all move Beth Am in a welcoming direction.

Section 3: Recommendations

The WWG recommends several areas for improvement that can be implemented through standing committees, clergy and staff. All of these recommendations are intended to ensure that Beth Am creates a warm atmosphere that is inviting both to members and guests. These recommendations include:

- Actively engage visitors and new members at services, and through informal opportunities such as new/prospective member dinners
- Rabbi or President to make announcements during family services to welcome guests and to identify designated people who can answer questions
- Greeters to wear name tags that identify themselves as greeters
- Improve signage to direct visitors to the side door when the front door is not open
- Improve signage in common area at the side entrance to announce service schedule/locations, and to recognize Beth Am community news
- Place a name-plate/color picture of all clergy and staff either outside each office, or in a common area at the side entrance. Also include this information on the web site.
- Use a more inclusive term than “guest” on High Holyday seat forms in identifying the option to reserve a seat for a non-Jewish spouse or partner.
- Improve awareness of the resources at Beth Am to counsel a member who is planning an interfaith marriage, to ensure the member and extended family feels supported during this life-cycle event.
- Upgrade the message boards, furniture and coat rack area in the common space, to create a more inviting gathering space.
- Clarify Beth Am’s encouragement for non-Jewish spouses or partners to be engaged as part of the Beth Am family, and to identify the many opportunities for education, participation, and support from clergy
- Clarify the *halakhic* basis for limitations on membership and ritual participation by non-Jews
- Revise the Dues Structure to include categories that are more inclusive of the diverse households in the Beth Am community.

Although the WWG does not recommend to change the membership status of non-Jewish spouses and partners, because we agreed there are both *halakhic* and UCSJ institutional reasons why Beth Am limits to Jewish adults the right to determine the future of the Jewish organization or to participate in certain Jewish rituals, we do recommend taking more definitive steps to ensure that non-Jewish spouses and partners are encouraged to be active in Synagogue life to the extent permissible under Jewish law. To this end, the WWG has prepared two important documents: (1) revised Dues Structure; (2) Interfaith Household Resource and FAQ Sheet. The proposed Dues Structure is attached at **Annex A**, and the proposed FAQ sheet is attached at **Annex B**.

Overall, the new Dues Structure has a cleaner look and structure. The most significant change in the new Dues Structure is that we substitute the term “Household” for the currently used terms such as “Family” or “Parent/Child.” Notwithstanding the changes, the terms in the new Dues Structure are consistent with the Beth Am by-laws categories of membership. For example:

- The dues structure categories of “Individual” and “Legacy” both track to the Article II.3(c) Individual Membership.
- The dues structure category of “Household of 1 Adult” and “Household of 2 Adults” in which 1 adult is not Jewish both track to Article II.3(b) Single Family Membership, because the non-Jewish spouse or partner does not have membership privilege, but would have certain other privileges such as the ability to reserve a High Holyday ticket at the same nominal rate as a member spouse or partner.
- The dues structure category of “Household of 2 Adults” in which 2 adults are Jewish tracks to the Article II.3(a) Family Membership

In our focus groups with interfaith households at Beth Am, the proposed new dues category was very well-received, and this feedback applies to both the changed terms and also to the explicit explanations of the opportunities and limitations for the non-Jewish spouse or partner in the FAQ sheet. Please see **Annex A** and **Annex B** for a complete view and explanation of the proposed changes.

If the Board of Trustees adopts the new Dues Categories, then for all interfaith households, Beth Am will provide the household with the option to select their preference to be either a “Household of 1 Adult” or a “Household of 2 Adults.” Because there is a financial difference as well as a philosophical difference between the categories, the decision about the category for each household will depend in large measure on the extent to which the non-Jewish spouse or partner desires to be an active participant in Synagogue life. As we indicate in the FAQ sheet, Henry is available to consult each family on this personal decision.

Further, if the Dues Category and FAQ sheet are approved by the Board of Trustees, then these documents will be the foundation for all our printed and online material on related topics. The necessary modifications would be made to all written and online material to be consistent with these documents.

Conclusion

The WWG recommends no changes in Beth Am’s by-laws or policies. However, we do recommend each of the above-listed specific actions. These changes will make Beth Am a more welcoming and egalitarian Jewish community, consistent with Beth Am traditions, with our obligations as a member of the UCSJ, and with *halakhah*.

WWG Members

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Annex A – Dues Category

BETH AM SYNAGOGUE DUES CATEGORIES

DUES CATEGORIES	AGE
Household of 2 Adults*	[>35]
Household of 2 Adults*	[31-35]
Household of 2 Adults*	[<30]
Household of 1 Adult	[>35]
Household of 1 Adult	[31-35]
Household of 1 Adult	[<30]
Individual	[> 35]
Individual	[31-35]
Individual	[<30]
Legacy	[23-29]

Dues amounts reflective of the 2008 year have been removed from this text.

Personal financial hardship is never a barrier to Synagogue participation! Please contact our Executive Director, Henry Feller, for a confidential discussion.

* An adult spouse or partner who is not Jewish is welcomed and encouraged to participate in all Synagogue activities permissible under Jewish law (*Halakhah*). For further information on both the opportunities and limitations on membership, please read our frequently asked question sheet for interfaith households, or contact our Executive Director Henry Feller.

Annex B – FAQ Sheet

Beth Am Welcomes Interfaith Households

Beth Am has a distinguished history as an egalitarian and inclusive Synagogue. At Beth Am, we respect and support the right of every person to make autonomous religious decisions. If you are the non-Jewish spouse or partner in a Beth Am household, we encourage you to be an engaged part of the Beth Am family. Here are some of the opportunities we offer:

- Adult learning classes to help you gain a comfortable understanding of our services and Jewish traditions
- Full involvement in the volunteer projects, educational activities, and all non-ritual committees
- Full access to and assistance of our clergy. Rabbi Konheim will also place his interfaith connections at your service if you wish to speak with clergy of your own faith and are not sure whom to contact.
- Participation in the religious school activities and life-cycle events of your family members.

Our staff and officers will be happy to discuss with you the many opportunities available that will help you to become a vital participant in our Synagogue's community.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. How does a household determine which Dues Category to choose?

Beth Am has established a dues structure that emphasizes our desire to welcome non-Jewish spouses and partners into Synagogue life to the fullest extent permissible under Jewish law (*halakhah*). If you are a non-Jewish spouse or partner who desires to be an active participant in Synagogue life and would like to attend High Holydays services, the “Household of 2 Adults” dues category might be the best choice for you. Beth Am also offers the “Household of 1 Adult” dues category, which may be preferable for interfaith households with children where the non-Jewish spouse or partner prefers a lower level of participation. To best determine which dues category is appropriate for your household, please contact our Executive Director, Henry Feller, for a confidential discussion.

2. Under the Dues Category of “Household of 1 Adult,” how many High Holydays tickets may my household reserve?

For a nominal fee of \$36 per seat, a Household of 1 Adult may reserve High Holyday tickets for 1 adult and each child in their household over the age of six. An additional High Holyday ticket may be reserved for \$336 for a spouse or partner.

3. Can a non-Jewish spouse or partner have a membership at Beth Am?

Beth Am offers many opportunities for non-Jewish spouses and partners to be active in Synagogue life to the extent permissible under Jewish law. For *halakhic* reasons membership is available only to individuals of the Jewish faith.

4. Why are there constraints for a non-Jewish spouse to be a Synagogue member?

Beth Am, like most covenant-based religious institutions, wants to be welcoming to all who come. At the same time, Judaism, like other faiths, has certain privileges and responsibilities that are available to those who are born into, or convert into our faith. It is for this reason that only Jews are allowed to perform certain rituals and blessings, much like only Catholics can accept communion. In order to be a member of a Conservative synagogue and partake of certain rites and rituals, one must be born a Jew or convert into Judaism. For more details on these *halakhic* reasons, please read on.

5. What are the *halakhic* limitations that apply to a non-Jewish spouse or partner?

When it comes to the participation of non-Jewish spouses or partners in Synagogue life there are three areas of limitations.

Committee involvement:

We are happy to have non-Jewish spouses or partners actively participate in all Beth Am committees except those with ritual responsibility. Presently, this includes the Board of Trustees and the Religious Services Committee.

Participation in services:

There are many opportunities for non-Jewish spouses or partners to participate in important family milestones such as a bris, b'nai mitzvah or wedding, and they can have a reading role during Shabbat services. At the same time, there are also some *halakhic* constraints. In accordance with the rules of the Conservative Jewish Movement, with which Beth Am is affiliated, a non-Jewish spouse or partner may not have Torah-related honors, nor recite blessings.

Voting:

On occasion, congregants may vote on major Synagogue issues. This opportunity to vote on such issues is only available to the Jewish spouse or partner.

6. In what ways can a non-Jewish spouse or partner participate in the life-cycle events of my family?

Honors are often awarded to people celebrating a life-cycle event. These events involve a core family as well as the community at large. We wish to have every member of the core family share in the joy. In these situations, such as a birth or a b'nai mitzvah, the non-Jewish family member often accompanies the Jewish family member to the Torah, as someone who enables this moment of joy to take place. While the Jewish family member recites the covenantal blessings, the non-Jewish family member is very much part of the occasion.

Beth Am also creates opportunities in the service that are not strictly Jewish ritual. These may include readings, the presentation of a *tallit* to a child, or saying some words to the child that do not have covenantal significance.

Resources for Interfaith Households

1. If I would like to discuss what activities I can participate in at Beth Am, as a non-Jewish partner or spouse, whom should I contact?

Rabbi Konheim is pleased to discuss any questions that you have.

2. Can you recommend any books or websites, or local or national organizations that can provide helpful information to interfaith households?

Rabbi Konheim is pleased to direct you to additional resources related to your specific interests. The following is an initial list of resources which provides a good starting point.

As you will understand, although we identify these organizations as a resource for learning, information and opinions found on external web sites may not represent the views of Beth Am Synagogue or its members.

Interfaith Community	www.interfaithcommunity.org
Jewish Family Services (JFS - Baltimore)	www.jfs.org
Jewish Outreach Network (part of JFS)	410-466-9200
The Jewish Outreach Institute	www.joi.org/
The Knot (has interfaith message board)	www.theknot.com
Rabbinic Center for Research & Counseling	http://www.rcrconline.org/

3. If I decide to marry a non-Jew, or if one of my children decides to marry a non-Jew, how will Beth Am work with me and my family in a manner that respects both *Halakhah* and my personal decision?

There are many ways that the Rabbi and the Synagogue provide acceptance and support, even though the Rabbi can not marry an interfaith couple. The Rabbi provides counseling support for the couple as well the extended families. He helps them work through religious and spiritual issues. He also provides source material for couples to work out their own wedding ceremonies that will represent the aspirations of both parties.

There are two reasons why the Rabbi can not conduct the wedding ceremony of an interfaith couple. The first is that the Jewish wedding creates a contractual relationship through the *ketubah* (contract) under Jewish law, and Jewish law can have no authority over non-Jews. The second is that while Beth Am is supportive of the people in an interfaith marriage, it is not appropriate to give religious sanction. As expressed above, however, withholding religious sanction does not mean withholding acceptance and support.

Our Synagogue is also working on a resource guide for interfaith couples to help them find local officiants. This will be available through the office.