

**Congregation B'nai Jeshurun**  
**Community Building Initiative (CBI) 2008-2009**  
Summary of Findings and Proposals, submitted March 1, 2009.

**UPDATE: WHAT'S BEEN DONE SO FAR**

**PHASE I: Assessment and Proposals – now completed.**

(September 15, 2008 – March 1, 2009)

- A. Conducted a status and needs assessment within BJ:
- Conducted 40 one-to-one conversations with members, board, staff, and rabbis.
  - Gathered input at 6 lay committee meetings.
  - Held 5 house meetings involving 87 people.
  - Conducted a community-wide survey with 451 responses.
  - Published weekly updates on a new online blog.
- B. Surveyed best practices in other congregations:
- Reviewed literature on megachurches, synagogue renewal, social psychology, and Jewish demographic trends.
  - Interviewed leadership at four other congregations.
- C. Identified BJ's strengths and opportunities for improvement and proposed new initiatives to strengthen community at BJ.

**FINDINGS**

**STRENGTHS**

- Members find Shabbat and holiday services spiritually uplifting and enjoyable; services attract BJ members most frequently of all BJ events. The rabbis and hazzan received extremely positive feedback for the spirituality and music at services.
- Most members report positive experiences when dealing with lifecycle/crisis issues at BJ.
- Programming at BJ is comprehensive and allows for a variety of interests.
- Small-group activities at BJ are popular and highly effective in creating strong bonds.
- In general, BJ members report strong feelings of connection with the synagogue.
- In general, BJ members feel well-informed regarding BJ programs and current news.
- Distance is an obstacle for some, but many BJ members are willing to travel far to be at BJ.
- Members are loyal and committed to BJ; there is a strong culture of participation and an appetite for increased participation and leadership.
- Members value BJ as a Shabbat-centered, spiritual community, and are not primarily looking to BJ for secular, community-center programming.

**OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT**

- Services can be alienating for people who have a lack of Jewish knowledge or experience.
- Members who come to services alone often feel lonely and excluded. There is an opportunity for veteran members, ushers, and rabbis to create a more welcoming environment at services. There is a feeling of being rushed out of the building after services.
- Services contribute to the perception that the rabbis are the only leadership; lay leadership should be more visible to the community at services.
- Members would like their involvement and/or presence to be recognized more by the rabbis, staff, and lay leaders. Many members want to feel that the rabbis know their names.
- Although small-group and demographic-based programming is popular, members expressed the need to balance these with cross-demographic and community-wide activities.

- Some of BJ's many programs have very low attendance rates. There is an opportunity to focus resources on more popular and/or effective programs.
- New members often feel adrift after the cycle of orientations and new member programs is over. There is an opportunity for further integration and development of new members.
- Although members recognize the need to be proactive, many desire guidance from staff and lay leaders in fostering their involvement. Some feel that new ideas are not welcomed by staff. There is an opportunity for BJ to be more responsive to members and their ideas.

## PROPOSALS

Our proposals are divided into three types. *Infrastructure* proposals would transform how community and relationships at BJ are currently organized. *Program* proposals are large-scale initiatives (not one-time events) using regular programs to build community. *Adjustments* are small-scale suggestions for changes to current practices.

At the decision-making meeting on March 11, participants will choose *two infrastructure proposals and two program proposals* for prioritization in the coming year. "Adjustment" proposals will not be discussed; they are left to the discretion of relevant staff and lay leaders.

### I. INFRASTRUCTURE

#### **A. Shabbat Hospitality Culture**

*Description:* BJ will develop a new, widespread culture of Shabbat meal hospitality in members' homes (on Fridays and Saturdays, including havdalah). To create self-sustaining momentum, BJ will set a high goal, perhaps 1,000 meals in the first year. The focus will be on organically self-organized meals of any size; however, some centrally-organized components will also be included, such as meal matches, marked space in the sanctuary after services, and/or online space to meet and arrange meals. A large core group of regular, committed hosts will receive recognition and mentorship to support their leadership.

*Rationale:*

- Small group opportunities are effective in creating community.
- Many members feel lonely after services and left out of other groups' plans.
- Shabbat meals build on BJ's strong emphasis on Shabbat and spiritual life.

#### **B. Online Tools for Community-Building**

*Description:* BJ will create an integrated, user-friendly online system for community building. Elements of the online community may include social networking sites for members (such as [linkedin.com](https://www.linkedin.com) and [ning.com](https://www.ning.com)), ways to self-organize activities, bulletin boards for personal and official announcements, discussion groups, blogs, opt-in contact info/directory, etc. While staff are now exploring initial steps (contact Communications Manager [Denise Waxman](#) to try the pilots), choosing this initiative would make it a much higher priority.

*Rationale:*

- Empowering lay leadership: while members recognize that they must take the initiative in finding community at BJ, many would like help taking that initiative.
- Members would like to meet other members by demographics and interests.

### **C. Member Development System**

*Description:* BJ will create a Member Development System to bring members more deeply into the community through successive levels of engagement (e.g., the New Member Orientation Programs would be at the first level; other series of programs and trainings will be at subsequent levels.) The system will also seek to renew a member-oriented culture focusing on members' participation, leadership, and relationships. It will include use of community organizing tools, such as individual meetings and house meetings, and may reorganize some staff and lay roles to include guiding members through BJ's programs. It will include training, Jewish learning, and leadership development for both staff and lay leaders.

*Rationale:*

- Members want help in initiating and growing their participation.
- New members often feel adrift after the initial orientation programs.
- Members feel disconnected from staff and would like partnership with them.
- Participants enjoyed the CBI process and want more of these opportunities.

### **D. Small Groups Initiative**

*Description:* BJ members will create, join, and sustain Small Groups based on their own interests, needs, and relationships. BJ will create forums, including online, for members to self-organize groups. Small Groups may exist for any length of time and be about any topic. Some should be organized geographically to facilitate intimate local community (meals, bikkur holim, etc.). BJ will offer recognition and mentorship for Small Group leaders, such as retreats or trainings. In order to reach a new level beyond current havurot and committees, BJ will set a high goal, such as 613 members in 50 Small Groups in the coming year.

*Rationale:*

- Members are looking for small group opportunities to create community.
- Members would like to meet other members by demographics and interests.
- While some members recognize that they must take the initiative in finding their community at BJ, others would like help taking that initiative.
- Small groups can allow members to pursue ideas without formal BJ approval.

## **II. PROGRAM**

### **1. Shabbat Pre-Onegs, Onegs, and Kiddushim**

*Description:* BJ will offer opportunities before and/or after Shabbat services *every Friday and Saturday* for the community to connect and socialize. The pre-onegs, onegs, and kiddushim will occasionally offer optional content, such as a learning opportunity or facilitated discussion, but the main focus of these activities will be to bring the community together (with staff and rabbis as well) in an informal way.

*Rationale:*

- BJ is a Shabbat-centered community with high attendance at services.
- Members would like more cross-demographic, community-wide programming.
- Members have a desire to connect more with the rabbis and staff.

## **2. Services Literacy Initiative**

*Description:* BJ will create an ongoing, large-scale initiative to increase literacy in Jewish services and prayer. Through classes, a learner's minyan, online tools, and/or lessons integrated into Shabbat services, the members will become more knowledgeable and connected participants in BJ's central communal experiences.

*Rationale:*

- BJ is a Shabbat-centered community with high attendance at services.
- Many members expressed feeling lost or confused during Shabbat services.

## **3. Weekly Beit Midrash ("Study Hall") and Schmooze**

*Description:* One night each week, the sanctuary will be open for self-directed Jewish learning on a timely topic in hevruta (pairs) or small groups. BJ will develop a library of Jewish books and a team of learning facilitators (e.g., rabbinical students). After the beit midrash time, there will be informal social time with coffee and cookies.

*Rationale:*

- Members are looking for informal ways to connect.
- Members have shown strong interest in educational and learning opportunities.
- Members would like more cross-demographic, community-wide programming.
- The proposal builds on BJ's strong identity as a Jewish spiritual community.

## **4. Immersive Community Experiences**

*Description:* BJ will revitalize and expand its current variety of retreats, trips, and Shabbatons, which are proven successes. With a range of lengths, locations, and costs, these immersive experiences will allow members to get to know one another, learn together, explore mutual interests, relate to the rabbis, and build community.

*Rationale:*

- Members would like to meet other members by demographics and interests.
- Members would like more cross-demographic, community-wide programming.
- Members consistently cite retreats and trips among their favorite BJ offerings.
- Short retreats and trips could maintain momentum during the slow summer.

## **5. Activities Fair and Reorientation**

*Description:* BJ will develop an activities fair and "current-member reorientation" to be held several times each year. These events will keep the community apprised of BJ's offerings, including new initiatives. They will help members to connect with one another and to get involved in many available opportunities. They will also help BJ to continually identify which programs are successful and/or popular.

*Rationale:*

- While some members recognize that they must take the initiative in finding their community at BJ, others would like help taking that initiative.
- Members would like to meet other members by demographics and interests.

### III. ADJUSTMENTS

#### *Services*

- Create a regular time for greeting one another during each service.
- Create a team of greeters to supplement the ushers at services.
- Hold one Friday service: to increase energy, enable kiddushim, and avoid rushing people out.
- Increase visibility of lay leadership (board reads announcements; one committee update).
- Reserve seating up front for new members at every service.
- Welcome new members and first-time attendees at every service.
- Offer childcare until Children's Services begin, so parents can pray with the main service.

#### *Role of the Rabbis*

- Schedule rabbis to stay for 10 minutes after a class or program for informal interaction.
- Brainstorm additional opportunities to create informal interaction with members.
- Ask BJ members who are rabbis to help out in more proactive, strategic ways.
- Welcome interfaith families while clarifying policies on ritual to avoid misunderstandings.

#### *Membership and Programming*

- Revise new member orientations to include more follow-up engagement.
- Increase the number of organized Shabbat dinners for new members.
- Ensure outreach to new members who join after the High Holy Day membership season.
- Publicize the Fair Share Dues; encourage members to ask about reduction before dropping.
- Consider dropping some programs in which only a few members participate.
- Diversify event locations, esp. to Brooklyn to connect with younger, less affluent members.
- Lower cost of community dinners, even at the expense of quality, to be more accessible.
- Lower space rental for lifecycles, esp. *brit*, when newer, younger families can bond to BJ.
- Offer food less likely to exclude those with common food allergies.
- Maintain advocacy focus on affordable housing to enable members to live near BJ.
- Keep our focus on God and Judaism: add spiritual dimensions to merely social events.

#### *Staff and Lay Leadership*

- Post photos and bios of staff, board, and committee chairs on BJ website.
- Offer refresher workshop for staff on responding to members' calls and inquiries.
- Create a 24- or 48-hour response policy for staff replying to member inquiries.
- Lay leaders and program staff should initiate more individual meetings with members.
- Use series of house meetings more frequently to gather input and identify lay leaders.

### **NEXT STEPS**

#### **PHASE II: Choosing Priorities; Planning for Implementation** (March 1 – April 15)

March 1 basic findings and proposals produced in outline form.

March 11 priorities chosen by board members, Membership Steering Committee, staff, rabbis.

April 1 a fuller narrative report will be produced, with additional background and detail.

April 15 preliminary plans and budgets for chosen initiatives will be completed.

#### **PHASE III: Piloting Programs / Groundwork for Longer Term** (April 15 – June 15)

- Some initiatives will be piloted and evaluated; others more fully prepared for next year.
- NYU Wagner Capstone group to design tools for future monitoring and evaluation.