



Community Building Initiative 2008-2009 Full Report with Recommendations

Submitted April 6, 2009
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**Congregation B'nai Jeshurun
Community Building Initiative (CBI) 2008-2009**

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** indicates proposal selected for implementation in 2009-2010*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September 2008, Congregation B'nai Jeshurun (BJ) embarked on the Community Building Initiative (CBI) in order to assess and improve upon the internal strength and development of its members' bonds with one another and with the community as a whole. To coordinate this initiative, BJ enlisted staff member Guy Austrian and a team of four graduate students from the Capstone Program of New York University's Wagner School of Public Service. They engaged the community in extensive internal and external research, including one-on-one interviews, house meetings, a congregation-wide survey, interviews with other synagogues, and a literature review. Synthesizing all of the external and internal research, the team produced a series of findings about BJ, categorized by congregational strengths and opportunities for improvement. It is clear that BJ members have powerful feelings of pride, gratitude, and joy about BJ's community, mission, and spiritual leaders. At the same time, that intensity leads to some disappointment and to a desire for deeper connections and more active participation.

Based on the findings from the research, Guy and the Capstone team developed a list of proposals for new initiatives. The list included major proposals for infrastructure and programming, as well as smaller adjustments to current practices. A summary of the findings and proposals was sent to BJ rabbis, staff, and lay leaders for review. That group came together on March 11, 2009, to discuss the proposals and to choose two program proposals and two infrastructure proposals as priorities for implementation. The proposals chosen were: Membership Development System; Online Tools; Immersive Community Experiences; and Kiddushim/Onegs pre- and post-services.

Following the selection and moving into the spring, a working group including staff and lay leaders is being convened for each project. The four working groups are charged with drawing up more detailed plans and budgets and beginning implementation.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT

Throughout the fall of 2008 and into the winter of 2009, Guy Austrian and the Capstone team undertook an extensive internal and external research campaign.

The internal assessment sought to better understand the current state of community, connectedness, and relationship-building at BJ: how are people finding their places in this large congregation, and how strong is the internal web of connections? How does the state of community at BJ reflect BJ's mission to be a *kehillah kedoshah*, a holy community, and a powerful, transformative institution in American Jewish life?

“BJ creates the feeling of community from the very first moment a person joins. I think the key is membership. Joining puts us "inside." The biggest challenge once inside is figuring out what one wants from the community and what one wants to do as a member of the community. Once those decisions are made, and once we each figure out what community means to us, everything we need is there for us to participate in at any time. BJ truly makes it all available. In the end it's up to each of us to join in.”

The initial round of internal research consisted of:

- five house meetings, facilitated by Membership staff and Membership Steering Committee lay leaders, and observed by Capstone team members;
- forty individual meetings with key staff and congregants, conducted by Guy;
- six group meetings with lay committees, also conducted by Guy; and
- BJ's most recent Exit Surveys for former members, and the New Membership Orientation Programs as observed and analyzed by Capstone team members.

Meanwhile, the external research sought to gain insight into best practices and strategies for welcoming and retaining congregants, developing lay leadership, and building community. The external assessment consisted of:

- assessment of popular and academic literature on "Congregational Welcoming and Inclusiveness," conducted by the Capstone team, and focusing on the areas of Demographic Research, Synagogue Life, Megachurches, and Social Psychology; and
- interviews with rabbinic and staff leadership at five diverse congregations: Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, Calif.; Temple Beth Am in Los Altos, Calif.; Kavana in Seattle, Wash.; Central Synagogue in New York, N.Y.; and Marble Collegiate Church in New York, N.Y.

A community-wide survey followed, with questions informed by the above research, as well as by input from BJ staff and the Membership Steering Committee. The survey, conducted in January 2009, was sent to the entire BJ community by e-mail. An additional 170 paper copies were mailed to households for which BJ has no e-mail address. The survey received 451 responses, representing nearly 25% of all households.

The findings from the external research, internal research, and survey results informed the program proposals put forward by Guy Austrian and the Capstone team.

Further details of the assessments can be found in the Appendices to this report.

“ I feel more connected now that my kids have been through the bar and bat mitzvah process. It is very big and somewhat hard to navigate. I try to be more involved, but I am more connected because of my children than I am for me.

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 accommodates 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 long distances 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.

“ I had the loss of a close family member this past year. I was deeply comforted by, and grateful for, the level of support given to me by the BJ. I felt so fortunate to be a member of BJ. I felt supported in so many ways, and from so many staff members at BJ. I will be eternally grateful for that.

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

Proposals are divided into three types: Infrastructure, Program, and Adjustments. 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, which are small-scale suggestions for changes to current practices, are also offered, but they were not discussed at the subsequent decision-making meeting; rather, they are left to the discretion of relevant staff and lay leaders.

“ It took me a long time to break in to the community, but once I did, I felt enveloped.

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, of 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.

Note: *Participants agreed that the Online Tools Initiative will include encouraging members to form small groups and join together for Shabbat meals.*

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.

* Proposals that were selected as new Community Building Initiatives

- 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.

Note: *Participants agreed that the Member Development System will would include events like the Activities Fair and a Volunteering Fair.*

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.

Note: *Participants agreed that the Immersive Experiences Initiative will include lower cost alternatives to the more elaborate retreats.*

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.

“ I’m not religious, so for me synagogue is 99% social, so if I go to an event and it’s not enjoyable, then I won’t come back. ”

- 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.

“As a BJ member, I not only feel a connection with my religious roots but through its many outreach programs, I have also been given the opportunity to be of service to the community in which I live. This is extremely important to me.”

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.

CHOOSING PROPOSALS FOR PRIORITIZATION

A group of about twenty-five stakeholders came together on March 11, 2009, to discuss the findings and proposals of the Community Building Initiative and to select the proposals with which BJ will move forward. The group included lay leaders from the Board of Trustees and the Membership Steering Committee, as well as the Membership staff, Executive Director Harold Goldman, and Rabbi Felicia Sol. The decision-making process was facilitated by Guy Austrian and the Capstone team with the goal of prioritizing two infrastructure and two program proposals. Prioritization was necessary so that BJ could focus resources on an achievable number of projects. Those not selected are available to be considered as options for implementation in future years.

In the first step of the process, the group reviewed the synagogue's vision and mission, established a set of criteria to evaluate the proposals, and clarified the findings and proposals. The criteria for the decision-making included (but were not limited to): "keeps us rooted in BJ's mission and values", "builds relationships," "fosters lay leadership," and "is achievable."

“I find no better place to cry, to be comforted, to think, to pray, to sing my heart out, and feel close to God and part of a community like no other. I see BJ in my son's participation in children's services and in the beauty that is all around us on Shabbat. Some of my closest friends are now from BJ. I treasure it, and BJ is the main reason why we can't move out of the area.”

The decision-making process included discussion in small groups, dropping of less popular proposals, and a gradual building of consensus. After a full-group discussion and much deliberation, the participants took a final vote to decide which initiatives the synagogue would begin to implement. Although there was strong support for other proposals within the group, the consensus-building process allowed for modifying the proposals to incorporate aspects of some other proposals into the planning and implementation of the new projects.

From among four Infrastructure proposals, the group chose to focus on:

- 1) Online Tools, noting that it should include a way to self-organize Shabbat meals; it should focus not only on individuals but on groups; and it should not become the only way to build community, so as not to exclude elderly members or others who are not active online; and
- 2) Member Development System, noting that it should focus on developing not only individuals but also groups of members; the system should also include some activities fairs and/or current member "re-orientation" programs.

From among the five Program proposals, the group chose to focus on:

- 1) "Pre-Onegs," Kiddushim, and Onegs: social/educational opportunities before and after services; and
- 2) Immersive Community Experiences such as retreats, trips, and Shabbatons (full 25-hour Shabbat experiences), with the notes that cost will be a significant challenge to be addressed, and that we should also consider creating extended evenings or half-days in the city.

PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

Each person who attended the decision-making meeting signed up to be part of a working group for at least one of the chosen projects.

Guy Austrian has undertaken to organize these four working groups. Each group will consist primarily of lay leaders, along with staff liaisons from the Membership Department, Youth and Family Education Department, and a rabbinic liaison. Preliminary meetings will be taking place in late April. In early May, based on these meetings, Guy will produce draft documents with fuller descriptions of each project, along with rough budgets.

Implementation will begin in May-June in the form of “pilots” for some parts of some of the four projects. For the most part, implementation will take place in the coming 2009-2010 program year, following the High Holy Days for 5770, and beyond. The hope is that these projects will be ongoing, evolving initiatives that gradually transform the way community works at BJ, producing more and stronger relationships that further BJ’s Jewish mission.

APPENDIX I: Internal Research

INDIVIDUAL MEETINGS

Throughout the fall of 2008 and concluding at the end of January 2009, Guy Austrian conducted a series of one-to-one conversations with ten staff members/rabbis, ten board members, and twenty additional members from across the community. From these conversations, the areas of greatest concern that emerged were the roles of the rabbis and lay leaders; connectivity and programming; and the definition of BJ. Discrepancies were noted in the structure of BJ and where the rabbis fit into that model. The spectrum of perception of the role of the rabbis stretched from direct connection and partnership with members to leadership of the congregation from afar. The most common middle ground focused on the multiple levels of leadership at BJ, where lay leaders and staff have the ability to serve as both ambassadors and shapers of BJ's mission. Notions of connection and community at BJ, both understood as the keys to member recruitment and retention, were also a main focus of the interviews. Interviewees noted that while BJ offers a wide variety of programming for its congregants, it is the responsibility of the community members to be proactive in using these entry points. Finally, interviewees spoke about their confusion over BJ's role in the lives of its congregants—whether it should, or already does, serve as a community center.

HOUSE MEETINGS

Over the course of two weeks in December 2008, close to 90 BJ members participated in five house meetings. These group conversations produced common themes about BJ and its community. Members enjoy religious programs and services and the spiritual meaning that they find in them. They also spoke positively about the spectrum of programs, specifically the retreats and small, intensively active committees that offer bonding, purpose, and personal growth. Many members voiced concern over the lack of social connection that is experienced by some new and current members. Services can feel lonely and confusing. People who feel connected socially seem to be those who initiate the connection to the BJ community themselves; there was some acknowledgment that those who are not comfortable making such overtures struggle to find community. The suggestions that emerged included BJ staff facilitating introductions between members of the community and greater opportunities for members to meet in small and large group settings, both within and across demographic specifications. People appreciated the opportunity to reflect and be heard at these meetings.

“ I came to B'nai Jeshurun in my mid-twenties and made an immediate connection with [Rabbi] Marshall [Meyer], who became my spiritual advisor and mentor. Later, in my early thirties, I met my wife. All of our friends married each other, and now our children are attending each other's b'nai mitzvot. What more could I ask for? ”

EXIT SURVEYS, 2007, 2008

Twenty-four individuals responded to the 2007 online exit survey and 36 responded to 2008 exit survey of departing members. Both surveys indicated that respondents originally

joined the synagogue for religious reasons or because of a desire to belong to a community. In the 2007 survey, half of the respondents attended weekly Shabbat services. The majority of respondents from both years did not participate in BJ's programs or try to contact the rabbis. Of those respondents that did contact the rabbis, they were somewhat satisfied with the experience. Of the social action programs, respondents were most likely to have attended and enjoyed the homeless shelter and the AIDS Walk. Of the reasons provided for leaving BJ, respondents cited a lack of connection, geographic challenges such as moving farther away, and joining another synagogue. In the 2008 survey, respondents reported leaving for financial reasons, and most of them did not contact the synagogue for help. Of those choosing to join a different synagogue in 2007, at least three have become more observant and have sought out more traditional shuls. The two exit surveys produced consistent results, except that the 2008 survey shows increased financial difficulty.

NEW MEMBER ORIENTATION PROCESS AND PROGRAMS

Each autumn, B'nai Jeshurun's three-part New Member Orientation Programs serve to welcome and orient new members to the BJ community. The Capstone team observed the December 2008 series. On the first evening, new members gathered with staff and lay leaders in a member's home to eat dinner, meet each other, and learn about BJ. The leaders conducted an interactive session on the history of the synagogue, then smaller groups provided an opportunity for each person to share his/her reasons for joining. The evening concluded with various people speaking in detail about the programs and prayer services at BJ, including volunteer opportunities and life cycle events. At the second night of the program, a week later, all participants brought dishes to contribute to a potluck dinner in order to introduce new members to the participatory nature of BJ. Following dinner, the new members were separated into two groups, each of which had an opportunity to interact with two of the rabbis through a question and answer session. All members came together for the conclusion of the program to learn more about what BJ offers its members and how members can proactively become involved and connected.

“ I feel sometimes that it is hard to weed out what exactly would be energizing at BJ and what I could help best at. There are a lot of opportunities in the e-mails, but I find it a bit far-reaching. I feel bad that I am not involved more, but time and distance make choosing specifics mandatory.”

In addition to the New Member Orientation Program, the process of welcoming new members occurs throughout the year. After initial registration, new members receive a welcome packet in the mail that includes information about BJ and its programs. During the High Holy Day season, the Membership Steering Committee makes calls to new members who joined over the summer (during the new member cycle that begins in May and leads up to the High Holy Days) to welcome the new members and to answer questions. There is a new-member Shabbat dinner in November, and all new members are invited for an aliyah during a particular Shabbat in February. For new members who cannot attend these orientation programs, BJ offers a one-night new member orientation in March. Finally, in April, new members are invited to informal “coffee hours” to meet other new members and to learn more about the synagogue.

CONGREGATION-WIDE SURVEY

At the beginning of 2009, 451 members of B'nai Jeshurun, or approximately 25% of households, completed a survey about their experiences at BJ. Demographically, the sample closely reflected the larger population in all aspects except gender; proportionally more women than men responded to the survey. The high response rate and similar demographics indicate that the survey results represent the BJ community as a whole. Several important themes became apparent through the survey responses, which informed the process of generating appropriate proposals.

Community and Connectedness

The sense of community at BJ is a significant motivator for people to join BJ and to maintain membership. Although only 46 percent strongly or somewhat agree that it is easy to meet other members, almost three quarters said that they feel like a part of the community. The survey responses indicated that there are many members in their 40s and 50s, including many singles, who are seeking a sense of community and looking to BJ for ways to connect.

Shabbat and Holidays

The survey responses showed that BJ is a definitively Shabbat- and holiday-centered community. Of all of BJ's events the most popular—with over 50 percent of respondents—were High Holy Day services, Friday night services, Holiday celebrations, and Shabbat morning services. Seventy percent attend services at least once per month (26 percent attend Shabbat services weekly, 27 percent attend two or three times per month, and 17 percent attend once a month). Only six percent did **not** attend a High Holy Day service. Eighty-six percent attended the first day of Rosh Hashanah services, and the same number attended on Yom Kippur. Of those who attend services alone, 82 percent stated that they are comfortable doing so.

In the open-ended comments, respondents expressed a lack of welcoming at services. Specifically, they said that children do not feel welcome, that ushers do not act as greeters, that there is not enough encouragement and facilitation to meet other members, and that there are barriers to participation in the services themselves (changing songs, unfamiliar customs and choreography, lack of Hebrew literacy, etc.). Respondents also feel that people rush to leave (or are rushed out) after Shabbat services, which causes some to feel left out and lonely. People said they would like to go to dinner with other members after services.

“ It has proven to be a highlight for my partner and me in so many ways. The education and the Friday dinners have been wonderful when we have been able to go, also giving us the opportunity to be with people we know and meet new ones.

Rabbis, Ḥazzan, and Staff

Seventy-one percent of respondents reported becoming a member at least partially because of the rabbis and ḥazzan. Additionally, 77 percent reported continuing their membership because of the spiritual leaders. Although people had a great deal of positive feedback to share about these individuals, many people expressed a desire for more interaction with the rabbis. Many respondents indicated that they would like the professional staff and lay

leaders to do more to facilitate their connection to the community. They also said that they are looking for more opportunities to share their ideas with the staff and were very glad to have the opportunity to do so through the Community Building Initiative.

Programming and Lifecycle/Crisis Services

While members feel that they have a solid knowledge of what BJ offers (86 percent somewhat or strongly agreed that they feel knowledgeable about what BJ offers), some people feel that they have not found programming that suits their needs. To further emphasize this point, there were 38 programs that only 20 percent or less of members participated in (12 of these 38 had less than a five percent participation rate). Among respondents, 31.2% belong to a JCC and/or Y, a figure rising to 75.2% for those living on the Upper West Side.

In times of crisis or need, 79 percent of respondents said they would feel comfortable reaching out to BJ for support. Of the 43 percent who have reached out, 72 percent were very satisfied, and 20 percent were somewhat satisfied.

“ We all understand and respect that BJ is ‘a Rabbi-Led Congregation.’ However, a monolithic pyramidal community structure of 3000 people is just not workable. Everyone cannot be directly connected to the rabbis. There must be multiple levels of leadership underneath. Remember Yitro's advice to Moses: ‘You cannot do it alone.’ ”

APPENDIX II: EXTERNAL RESEARCH

EXTERNAL CONGREGATIONAL INTERVIEWS

Central Synagogue, Manhattan

In an effort to provide quality over quantity, Central Synagogue caps their membership at 2050, which they believe is the number that they can effectively serve. They usually have a waiting list for membership of 150 to 175 families.

The rabbis at Central Synagogue come down from the bimah during services to greet attendants row by row and encourage all worshipers to greet one another. Each new household receives a welcome packet and a call from a rabbi. The synagogue's "No One is a Stranger at Central" program welcomes new members and plans programs specifically for them. For example, the synagogue provides a pre-service event with one clergy member so that new members can meet each other, get to know a rabbi, and attend services as a group.

Kavana, Seattle

Kavana's structure is based on a "co-op" model. Members are called "partners," and partnership has both benefits and responsibilities. With a strong focus on geographic location, the synagogue publicizes home hospitality and program opportunities by neighborhood. In the future, they envision having multiple neighborhood "pods" with roving clergy and educators.

Each new Kavana partner receives a "meaningful" contact from the rabbi and a "meaningful" contact from another partner. The partnership forms are used as a jumping-off point for a one-to-one conversation with the rabbi.

Temple Beth Am, Los Altos, Calif.

Temple Beth Am announces each new member, by e-mail, to staff and lay leaders. Each new member receives a handwritten note, a welcome packet, a call from a committee member and a call from a rabbi. The new members are added to an e-mail list that blasts event announcements. They are also invited to a New Member Potluck, where current members bring the food to welcome the new members, who are brought to the bimah for a blessing.

Additionally, Temple Beth Am has begun a program called "Reach-Out-and-Connect-a-Thon," in which a team of clergy, staff, and lay leaders calls every single member in one day. The synagogue also matches members for Sukkot celebrations and Passover Seders.

Valley Beth Shalom, Encino, Calif.

Valley Beth Shalom is developing a four-level program, based in part on a program run at Saddleback Church, to increase involvement and to create a pathway to leadership. The core of the program is the synagogue's long-running home-based series, "Live a Jewish Life," in which groups of new member families meet with a rabbi once a month for a year to talk about Jewish issues. The synagogue hopes to change the long-term culture of the community to be one in which small groups form naturally and constantly.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Summary of Topics

Demographics:

Jewish population studies show that fewer Jews today identify as Jewish by religion and fewer Jews today identify with a particular movement. Additionally, the studies show that Jews join synagogues for myriad reasons, meaning synagogue affiliation does not predict religiosity or spirituality. In non-Orthodox synagogues, members tend to join when they need b'nai mitzvah services. The New York population study showed that synagogue members were more likely than non-members to feel connected to the Jewish community in New York. Additionally, the study found that New York Jews are more likely to participate in Jewish cultural activities than religious activities.

Synagogue Life:

The major theme of literature on synagogue life is the need to reflect on current practices and implement new methods for improvement. Synagogues are encouraged to adopt practices that allow the staff to recognize the needs of new and current members and to create programs that make members feel important and a strong part of the synagogue's life. In order to maintain strong support from congregants, as well as grow membership, synagogues need to transform their practices with an emphasis on making members feel welcome.

“My BJ experience changed completely after traveling with BJ on the 180th anniversary Israel trip - one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life. I feel blessed to have shared that experience with so many people, I've made some great friends through this and definitely feel part of the community.”

Megachurches:

Megachurches are defined as “any Protestant congregation with a sustained average weekly attendance of 2000 persons or more in its worship service.” Megachurch attendees tend to be college graduates, married with young children. Weekly worship services are the main focal point of the megachurch, and it is here that the congregation is able to connect to the church's charismatic leader. Megachurches also promote connectedness by offering multifaceted programming, including educational, social, recreational, and community service opportunities.

With such large congregations, programming at megachurches has emphasized small study groups and home-based fellowships. Though effective, recent doubts have arisen over whether these tools in fact provide deep, long-term relationships. A 2008 survey of North America's largest churches found that the emphasis on small groups may have led to a decrease in the number of congregants who feel that their church feels like a close-knit family.

Social Psychology:

The social psychology research on groups provides a variety of reasons and conclusions pertaining to why people choose to join groups, including: to pursue goals that the individual

could not achieve alone, to share information and gain knowledge, and to contribute to the group's

“It is good for lost souls like me who have never belonged to any community. There is something holistic about it.”

objectives. Additionally, people join groups to enhance self-esteem and sense of self, to alleviate uncertainty about identity and personal attributes, and to find comfort and support, especially in times of personal difficulty. Finally, people join groups as a way of connecting and affiliating in a variety of ways, including seeking a sense of belonging and acceptance, social engagement and affection, and a venue for exercising social power.

1. Demographic Research

National Jewish Population Surveys:

- **“Strength, Challenge and Diversity in the American Jewish Population,” Sept 2003.**
- **“American Jewish Religious Denominations,” Feb 2005.**
- **“Highlights of the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Study,” 1991.**
- **“Jewish Identity: Facts for Planning,” 1974.**

NATIONAL JEWISH POPULATION SURVEY	2000 (%)	1990 (%)	1971 (%)
AFFILIATION			
Highly affiliated (more than one membership)	28	-	-
Moderately affiliated (one membership)	28	-	-
Unaffiliated	44	-	-
Belong to a synagogue	46	32.9	46.3
Volunteer under Jewish auspices			
Volunteer under Jewish auspices	25	-	-
Regard being Jewish as very important	52	-	-
JEWISH IDENTITY (by movement)			
“Just Jewish” (identity, not membership)	25	10.1	12.2
Reform (identity, not membership)	34	38.0	30
Conservative (identity, not membership)	26	35.1	40.4

Ukeles, Jacob B., and Ron Miller. *The Jewish Community Study of New York: 2002 Highlights.* UJA Federation of New York. June 2003.

Sampling New York City and Nassau, Suffolk, and Westchester counties, the study counted 972,000 Jews in 455,000 Jewish households in New York City.¹ One-third of respondents reported an annual income below \$35,000 and one-third reported that they are “just managing” financially. Twenty-two percent of Jewish couples in the New York area are

¹ Note: With 1,900 households, about 0.4% of NYC Jewish Households belong to BJ.

intermarried, which is half the national rate. Since 1991, a greater proportion of Jews identify as Orthodox and Just Jewish, while a lesser proportion identify as Reform, Conservative, or Reconstructionist.

Of those Jews living in the city, 43 percent belong to a synagogue (up from 38 percent in 1991). Manhattan, Staten Island, and Suffolk County have the lowest rates of synagogue membership (the highest rates are in Nassau and Westchester counties). Regardless of membership, most Jews attend synagogue: 29 percent attend monthly or more, 15 percent attend less than monthly, 40 percent attend infrequently, and 16 percent never attend. Additionally, about three quarters attended a JCC and/or Jewish cultural event in the year prior to the study. When asked if they felt part of a Jewish community in the New York area, synagogue members and married or widowed Jews were more likely to respond “yes” than non-members and single Jews.

Mayor, Egon and Barry A. Kosmin. “An Exploration in the Demography and Outlook of a People.” *American Jewish Identity Survey 2001*. Feb 2002.

The AJIS report claims that 41% of Jews are part of the adult Jewish “core”: adults who are Jews by religion, birth, or choice. The “non-core” population includes Jewish children, Jews by birth who practice another religion, and non-Jews living in Jewish households. According to the survey, the number of adults who consider themselves Jewish by religion has decreased since 1990, while the number considering themselves Jewish with no religion has increased. The researchers found that at least 31% of synagogue members do not consider themselves to be religious, demonstrating that synagogue affiliation does not indicate feelings of being religious.

Cohen, Steven M. and Lauren Blitzer. *Belonging without Believing: Jews and their Distinctive Patterns of Religiosity – and Secularity*. Mandel Center for Excellence in Leadership & Management at JCCs. 2008.

Using the 2008 Pew US Religious Landscape Survey, Cohen and Blitzer try to determine whether Jews look demographically more like a religious group or an ethnic group. Large majorities of Jews—at some time during their lifetimes—join synagogues, participate in holiday observances, and observe some religious practices. At the same time, most Jews attend services rarely and support political and social causes that parallel secular American causes.

When compared with Catholics, mainstream Protestants, and Evangelical Christians, Jews are **least** likely to believe that God absolutely exists or that religion is a very important part of their lives. They are also **least** likely to: attend religious services weekly, pray daily, pray or read the Bible with their children, or look to religious teachings for guidance on questions of right and wrong. Jews are **more** likely to: support liberal causes such as abortion or gay rights, identify as Democrats, and believe that religion causes more problems than it solves.

Cohen, Steven M. “Members and Motives: Who Joins American Jewish Congregations and Why.” *S3K Report*. Fall 2006. Number 1.

Cohen reports differences in participation among the denominations among people who belong to synagogues. Orthodox congregations are more likely to be small, but their congregants are most likely to be lifelong members and to be highly engaged in Jewish life. Conservative synagogue members tend to join when their children begin studying for b’nai

mitzvah and are likely to continue membership afterward. Reform synagogues tend to be larger, and members tend to leave once their children become b'nai mitzvah. Conservative and Reform Jews tend to have lower levels of engagement in Jewish life overall. Cohen also stresses that intermarried families represent 17 percent of married synagogue members, while they make up nearly half of all married Jewish households.

Cohen, Steven M., J. Shawn Landres, Elie Kaunfer, and Michelle Shain. *Emergent Jewish Communities and their Participants: Preliminary Findings from the 2007 National Spiritual Communities Study*. S3K Synagogue Studies Institute and Mechon Hadar. November 2007.

When compared with synagogue members in the 2000-01 NJPS, members of emergent Jewish communities (independent minyanim, rabbi-led emergent, and alternative emergent) are more likely to be women, under the age of forty, and participate in culturally Jewish activities. They are less likely to be married or to identify with a movement; they tend to have strong Jewish identities and a history of Jewish education and involvement. Of the minyanim discussed in the study, independent minyanim (communities without rabbinical leadership and not supported by any larger institution) are more common than others, representing 59 percent of the communities. This fact may indicate that young people who are attracted to minyanim are also, or at least partly, attracted to a lay-leadership model.

Bruce, Deborah. "New People in U.S. Congregations: Who Are They and Why Do They Come?" Presentation at the Religious Research Association (RRA). Kansas City: 2004.

Bruce found that the majority of new church members had transferred from another congregation (57 percent), and very few were new to church altogether (7 percent). Of the reasons that respondents indicated for choosing to first visit the congregation, the most cited reason (48 percent) was "someone I knew told me about it or asked me to visit." When asked in what ways the congregations recognized the respondents as visitors, the most cited methods were: greeted by people sitting near by, greeted by an usher, and greeted by the clergy. When asked how the congregations followed up with visitors, the most common response was that there was no contact after the first visit. Some received correspondence or a package of materials. Very few had direct contact with the clergy or other members.

"Key findings: Who worships in the U.S.?" *The US Congregational Life Survey: A National and International Study of Congregations*. <http://www.uscongregations.org>.

The survey found that one in three worshipers has been attending his/her congregation for five years or less, and that 20 percent of worshipers have attended the congregation for the first time. Based on this finding, the survey concluded that most congregations have a high turnover rate and should strengthen their retention strategies. Most worshipers primarily connect with their congregations through religious services: 83 percent attend worship services almost every week, while only 38 percent are involved in small groups at their congregation.

The survey found that women are more likely than men to attend worship services. Additionally, 38 percent of worshipers have at least a college degree, higher than the national rate (23 percent). The survey found that worshipers are likely to be "good neighbors," meaning that they help people outside their families, and are likely to be "good citizens," meaning that they are very likely to vote and somewhat likely to get involved in community issues.

Profile of Nondenominational Churches: A Report from the Organizing Religious Work Project.
http://www.hartfordinstitute.org/cong/nondenom_ORW.html

The Hartford Institute reported on the common qualities of nondenominational churches. Some relevant statistics include:

- 60% of congregations have half or more members with a high school degree or less.
- 54% have some members who have completed some graduate work.
- 84% have members with a household income below \$15,000.
- 50% have members with a household income above \$75,000.
- 60% have half or more young adult members.
- 50% have hardly any members over the age of 65.

2. Synagogue Life

Aron, Isa, Sara Lee, and Seymour Rossel, ed. *A Congregation of Learners: Transforming the Synagogue Into a Learning Community*. UAHC Press. New York: 1995.

Jewish education is critical to maintaining Jewish identity and continuity. In order to understand why assimilation and abandoning the religion are so prevalent, one must first understand the current Jewish education system. Improving Jewish education is the key to enhancing Jewish identity in America. Jewish Americans affiliate with synagogues more than any other institution, therefore incorporating education into the different aspects of synagogue life and creating “Congregations of Learners” is the most effective way to promote Jewish education and Jewish identity.

***The Lifecycle of Synagogue Membership: A Guide to Recruitment, Integration and Retention*. URJ Press. New York: 2001.**

The guide includes descriptions of how to recruit, integrate, and retain congregants, with recommendations, specific tools, and case studies. Chapter 4, “Integration: Connecting With and Engaging Your Members from the First Day,” emphasizes the importance of guiding new members in learning the “ropes” of the synagogue as well as creating a sense of inclusion by implementing concepts such as “welcome baskets” and “buddy systems.” The guide also suggests methods for retention including involving members in projects and programs and honoring or paying recognition to involved members.

Herring, Hayim. “Five Steps Toward Revitalizing Synagogues.” *The Jewish Week*. 27 Oct 2005.

Rabbi Herring suggests five guidelines for synagogues to be welcoming:

1. Think about what the *synagogue* should be doing, not what *individuals* are not doing. Synagogues should ask, “How can we become more relevant to them?”
2. Create inclusive opportunities for a diverse community (gay Jews, Jews of color, interfaith families, etc.).
3. Offer programs for people regardless of affiliation level.
4. Tap into members’ skills in order to utilize talents within the community.

5. Encourage members to join by encouraging current members to be more involved.

Wolfson, Ron. *Spirituality of Welcoming*. Jewish Lights Publishing. Woodstock: 2006.

This book studies common synagogue practices and assesses the challenges that synagogues today are experiencing. The author suggests a new approach for improvement that emphasizes the importance of welcoming and inclusiveness. The author looks to Chabad, megachurches, and a spectrum of synagogues for best practices in this method, and then describes to readers how to create:

1. Welcoming Ambience
 - Provide tips to synagogue staff for “great greeting.”
 - Ensure that the layout of the synagogue will be easy for newcomers to navigate.
2. Welcoming Worship
 - Use music to create an uplifting and enjoyable service.
 - Implement creative ways to transmit spiritual messages from the pulpit.

The key to incorporating these ideas successfully is the willingness of synagogue leaders and volunteers to transform the current practices.

3. Culture of Megachurches

“Megachurch Definition.” *Hartford Institute for Religion Research*. Hartford.

This article defines “megachurches” as “any Protestant congregation with a sustained average weekly attendance of 2000 persons or more in its worship service.” In addition to defining megachurches, the article describes the common megachurch strategy of using home fellowship and interest-based small-group meetings in order to enhance the sense of community. The article lists the twelve most common characteristics of megachurches:

1. strong charismatic senior male ministers
2. many associate pastors
3. large staff
4. robust congregational identity
5. a multitude of programs and ministries organized and maintained by members
6. high levels of commitment and giving by members
7. seven-day-a-week activities at the church
8. contemporary worship
9. state of the art sound and projection systems
10. auxiliary support systems, such as bookstores, coffee shops, etc.
11. huge campuses of 30-100 acres near highways
12. significant parking lots and sanctuaries

Kroll, Luisa. “Megachurches, Megabusiness, Forbes Magazine.” *Forbes*. New York: 17 Sept. 2003.

This article discusses megachurches and their use of corporations’ growth practices. The pastor, Kroll claims, acts like the chief executive in the use of business tactics for congregational growth. These pastors take cues from entrepreneurs who have made use of

strategic partnerships to assist in growth. Technology has a key role. Ninety-nine percent of the megachurches have websites that they use to communicate with their members. The churches post transcripts of sermons, display events calendars, showcase current newsletters, and archive past newsletters. Additionally, business-savvy megachurches have held conferences and made use of radio and television. Megachurches' size and growth have not been an accident. The churches act like corporations; media and marketing strategies abound.

Loveland, Anne C., and Wheeler, Otis B. *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch: A Material and Cultural History*. University of Missouri Press. Columbia: 2003.

This book looks at the rise of megachurches in the second half of the 20th century. The main method the churches have employed to market themselves builds upon the consumerism of modern Americans. In a "mall mentality," Americans want one-stop shopping, which the megachurch provides. Churches also use their size as a key marketing tool. Much of the book's focus is on the physical space of the church, which makes an impression on the congregants, although there is a high level of variation in the church structures. Additionally, the book focuses on six characteristics that a megachurch needs for success:

1. emphasis on attitudes and lifestyles
2. cultural relevancy
3. provision of an opportunity to associate with like people
4. allowance for many entry points through educational, social, recreational, and community service opportunities, in addition to worship, which must be accompanied with a religious message
5. an accessible minister who is able to maintain eye contact with the congregation throughout the service, leading to a sense of togetherness and intimacy
6. an ability to serve as the center of life for the whole family, with opportunities after work and on weekends

Thumma, Scott. "Exploring the Megachurch Phenomena: Their Characteristics and Cultural Context." *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: Megachurches in Modern American Society*. UMI Dissertation Publishing. Ann Arbor: 1996.

Thumma relays that it is not the denominational affiliation that matters, but the church offerings that attract congregants. He also discusses the megachurches' programmatic approach. Megachurches "preach the message of active involvement and high commitment, provide the structures and ministries to support that involvement, and, then allow members to choose how committed they want to be." Diversity of programming allows for a high level of congregant commitment. Below are the six entry points that Thumma identifies along with programming in each area:

1. **religious and spiritual issues:** age-graded Bible studies, prayer groups, new member sessions, and religious education classes
2. **interpersonal ties, fellowship, and social interaction:** home groups, covenant communities, recreational activities, sports events, and organized celebrations
3. **volunteer activities:** assisting in the functioning of the church and assisting in the performance of its ministries

4. **physical and psychological well-being of members:** health fairs, preventative health clinics, employment support, vocational training, job fairs, 12-step-type recovery groups, and individual counseling services
5. **interest groups:** music lessons, choir rehearsals, political action committees, auto repair clinics, private schools, day care centers, children, teen and young adult activities, roller rinks, pools, gymnasiums, racquetball courts, weight rooms, and movie theaters
6. **engaging less-committed members:** new member classes, personal deacons, fellowship groups, assistance in discovering ministry gifts, ministry "fairs," volunteer recruitment drives, and courses to instruct new members in the Christian faith

Regarding small groups within the churches, Thumma says they "offer small group opportunities to find intimacy in a megachurch, if one is interested in looking for it. At the same time, these structures may not provide the deep, long term relations . . . that [promote] true intimacy." In order to find other ways to foster community, megachurches have identified the use of media resources; technology also allows the pastor to be available to each congregant.

Thumma also speaks on membership attrition and participants who fail to join:

[Megachurches must] compete with the strong societal norm that justifies sporadic attendance and marginal participation. In addition, all churches have to deal with people who feel that they can drop in, enjoy the show, and ignore the threats to give or be involved, even at the cost of possible eternal damnation. Unlike many other congregations, however, megachurches often spend much more time attracting those who choose to be committed rather than trying to coerce marginal members to change their minds.

Every successful organization has to attempt to weed out its free-riders either by encouraging them to leave or by getting them involved.

Thumma, Scott, Dave Travis, and Warren Bird. "Megachurches Today 2005: Summary of Research Findings."

http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megastoday2005_summaryreport.html

Although the majority of megachurches belong to a denomination, more are nondenominational (34 percent) than any specific denomination. Megachurch attendees tend to be young, college graduates, married, and have young children. Looking at the average number of professionals and volunteers at megachurches, the article concludes that the average megachurch has a ratio of one staff or volunteer to every ten attendees.

Megachurches tend to emphasize evangelism and recruitment. Fifty-eight percent of congregations report this as a key activity, and 37 percent report that it is a minor emphasis. The study also found that the churches with the highest rate of attendance growth tended to involve their membership more in recruitment. Regarding new members, the study found that congregations engage in the following activities:

- invitation to participate in a fellowship or other small group
- an orientation class for new members
- invitation to volunteer for service in the congregation or the community
- hospitality extended by designated members such as invitations for meals
- follow-up visits by clergy, lay leaders, or members

Very few megachurches (3%) have no planned procedures or activities for new members.

4. Social Psychology

Borkowski, Nancy. *Organizational Behavior in Health Care*. Jones and Bartlett. Sudbury: 2005.

Borkowski uses Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to identify the reasons why people join groups: to satisfy a need to belong and feel accepted; to fill a need for social engagement and affection; to feel safe; to reduce a sense of powerlessness and anxiety; to enhance self-esteem and social identity; to achieve goals that one could not accomplish on his or her own; and to contribute to the group's and other members' goals and objectives. People also decide whether to continue affiliation with a group. In short, membership continues when the rewards (listed above) equal or exceed the costs of membership (namely, time and money).

Hogg, Michael A., Zachary P. Hohman, and Jason E. Rivera. "Why Do People Join Groups? Three Motivational Accounts from Social Psychology." *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*. 2.3 (2008): 1269-1280.

This article focuses on three main theories about why people join and remain affiliated with groups. The Sociometer theory claims that people have a need to be socially included, and that self-esteem is an apt way to measure belonging. Second, the Terror Management theory explains that people join groups to reduce their fear of dying. Finally, the Uncertainty-Identity theory holds that being in a group alleviates uncertainty about people's sense of self, of their attributes, and of their place in the world. The authors conclude that all of these theories play some role, but that the Uncertainty-Identity theory seems to be the most universally applicable.

Jex, Steve M. *Organizational Psychology: A Scientist-Practitioner Approach*. John Wiley and Sons. Hoboken: 2002.

From an evolutionary perspective, people joined groups to survive. This adaptive behavior became the norm and has naturally persisted over centuries. Second, people join groups to fill a need for affiliation, which includes a desire for contact and a wish to be in the company of others. A lack of affiliation can lead to psychological adjustment issues or more severe psychopathology. A third reason for joining groups is a desire for social power, including an ability or opportunity to influence others' behavior. People seek positions of leadership to exert power over others. Fourth, people join groups in order to achieve goals more effectively than the member could do alone; examples are lobbying and advocacy groups. Finally, people join groups to fill a need for comfort and support, especially during times of anxiety or difficulty. This is especially helpful if others in the group have similar challenges. In sum: people join groups for specific reasons; group membership is not random. Although groups often form for a particular purpose, members likely get other benefits from membership.

Pennington, Donald C. *The Social Psychology of Behaviour in Small Groups*. Taylor and Francis, Inc. New York: 2002.

Describing why people join groups, the author comes to the following conclusions: people generally have more autonomy in deciding to join an informal group, compared to a formal group, and people choose to join informal groups for a variety of reasons. They join to seek a sense of security, to enhance self-esteem, to share information and gain knowledge, to affiliate and fulfill social needs (desire to be with others), and to achieve goals or objectives.