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Rabbi Chaim Marder of the Hebrew Institute of White Plains, N.Y., talks to seniors enjoying lunch at the shul's Leisure Thursday program in June.

EXTREME SHUL MAKEOVER

Captive audience not so captive?

Orthodox study shul revitalization

By Sue Fishkoff

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ENGLEWOOD, N.J. (JTA) — When rabbis and educators from the liberal denominations discuss outreach and engagement, they often gripe that the Orthodox don't have to worry about such matters because they have a built-in constituency.

That's only partially correct, say Orthodox leaders.

“It’s absolutely true we don’t have some of the problems they have, but we have different problems, and on some level we share the same concerns,” says Rabbi Shmuel Goldin of Congregation Ahavath Torah in Englewood, N.J.

Noting that Reform and Conservative rabbis are worried about “getting people in the door,” Goldin says, “that we don’t have — on Shabbat morning we have thousands of people. But why are they there? And are they getting what they should?”

Ahavath Torah’s 700 member families will spend the next two years davening, or praying, in a huge tent while they rebuild their synagogue. They’re using the physical upheaval to examine who they are and where they want to go as a congregation.

“Change is good,” Goldin says. “We’ll consider the quality of our prayer. Are we addressing each population correctly? How do we increase learning? Can we be a large community and still be personal? We’re a very Zionist community; we travel to Israel at least once a year as a congregation, but should we encourage aliyah?” Many Orthodox congregations are going through this same self-examination. And they have fewer tools to help them. National synagogue revitalization programs like Synaplex, the Experiment in Congregational Education and even Synagogue 2000 are based on assumptions that many Orthodox Jews don’t share. Who would schedule a yoga class during services? And how could you show a film or play music on Shabbat, when such activities, according to Jewish law, are forbidden?

Just two of the 100 synagogues that have participated in Synagogue 2000 are Orthodox. One is the Hebrew Institute of White Plains in White Plains, N.Y., which, after intensively re-examining itself and its relationship with its congregants, was able to change “the norms of how we do business,” says Rabbi Chaim Marder.

As a result, the synagogue has sharpened its focus on being a warm, welcoming congregation that accepts people at various levels of observance. “We’re getting people who aren’t looking for the monolithic Orthodox synagogue,” says Marder, who concedes that some of the innovations have worked and some have not.

In an effort to address the needs of different groups within the congregation, the Hebrew Institute has continued its women’s prayer group and its “Leisure Thursday” program for older Jews, and has added a men’s learning group that meets several times a year at a local Chinese restaurant.

Two of the 100 congregations that have taken part in Synaplex are Orthodox. One is Beth Israel Abraham and Voliner in Kansas City, Mo. The other is Baron Hirsch Congregation in Memphis. At least two more Orthodox synagogues have signed up and are planning to participate in the near future, according to Synaplex officials.

Although his Synaplex Shabbats have been “very popular,” Beth Israel’s Rabbi David Fine admits the idea of scheduling an event in one room while services are going on in another is problematic for him as an Orthodox rabbi. “Are we sending a message we don’t want to be sending, that it’s OK not to go to services?” he wonders. “We had to struggle with that issue.”

Ultimately he decided to go with the program because of its outreach potential.

“We’re in the middle of Kansas,” he points out. “These people aren’t going to synagogue anyway; they’re going to the mall. I’m willing to try things so long as I can defend them halachically.” Recognizing that Orthodox congregations such as Fine’s are confronting a host of changing social realities, the movement’s Rabbinical Council of America has come up with its first national program for synagogue transformation.

The S. Daniel Abraham Synagogue Leadership Renewal Program is designed to help Orthodox shuls grapple with such issues as new attitudes regarding the religious role of women, a growing thirst for spirituality among younger Jews, and the challenges posed by increasing involvement with the outside community around them.

The Abraham initiative will be tested-marketed for two years in a handful of northern New Jersey congregations, including Ahavath Torah, before it is rolled out nationally.

Orthodox congregations are feeling pressure from many sources, including young members who crave a different atmosphere than that normally found at many shuls, according to RCA's executive vice president, Rabbi Basil Herring. "They don't want big, impersonal synagogues; they want something boutique that speaks to their spiritual needs," he says.

The Abraham initiative has many goals, including fostering greater congregant participation. It also encourages shuls to experiment with different minyans offering various styles of praying — "all using the same Siddur and all davening the same prayers," according to Herring. "It's a question of style, not substance."

The Abraham program has been a year in the making, but Herring says some congregations are already adopting "bits and pieces of it," including those portions related to expanding the role of women in the synagogue. Congregations, he adds, are "sitting down with the women and saying, 'OK, how can we accommodate you?' "