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Temple Sinai Pursues Excellence in Early Childhood Education

May 23, 2014, SUMMIT, NJ – Temple Sinai was one of eight select Reform congregations in North America that participated in the Union for Reform Judaism's (URJ) *Pursuing Excellence Through Your Early Childhood Center Community of Practice* convening in Dallas, TX, last week.

This convening, attended by Temple Board President Chuck Meyer-Hanover and Early Childhood Education Program Director Amy Damast, was the culmination of an 18-month URJ-led process, in which the eight congregations met both in person and in virtual gatherings to discuss innovative ways to make their early childhood centers a gateway to deep, lifelong engagement for children and families alike. From expanding child care hours to revising their communications strategy through extensive Facebook networking and advertising, each team had numerous opportunities to experiment with new approaches for engaging families with young children.

“When we look back on this process, we are incredibly inspired by the fact that the participants not only utilized the tools we provided, but have done so in innovative ways, beyond what we could have imagined. Congregations have shifted their approach to reaching out to parents beyond traditional methods. One congregation decided to target expectant parents throughout their Jewish community with a welcome kit and direct involvement of clergy and congregational staff,” said URJ Director of Early Childhood Engagement Cathy Rolland. “While we facilitated this process for them and shared our knowledge, we learned as much from them as they did from us.”

Having launched its Early Childhood Education Program only 18 months ago, Temple Sinai has already attained great success with its foray into educating young children and their families. For example, it has expanded its outreach to the Summit community and beyond, offering informal Jewish programming for families with young children.

“We have opened our Early Childhood Education Program and our Temple to all local families with young children, regardless of religious or Temple affiliation, with the goal of creating a ‘community within a community,’” explains Director Damast. “And we have done just that – we have children, parents, and grandparents who regularly attend Tot Shabbat and other celebrations, month after month. These families have developed relationships with Temple staff, our clergy, and most importantly, each other. We are delighted that early childhood events at Temple Sinai provide another avenue for families to explore Jewish identity with their young children in a relaxed, comfortable, and welcoming setting.”

Reflecting on the exciting work that Temple Sinai and the other congregations look forward to on the road ahead, Rolland said, “I am convinced that the congregational leadership teams will continue to support one another, while engaging young Jewish families, thereby building Jewish peoplehood for generations to come”.

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