

***A Brief History of North Shore Congregation Israel
Founding 1920:***

In 1920, the North Shore was far more sparsely settled than it is now. Many suburbs had almost more empty lots than houses, cars were far fewer than now, roads poorer (many streets were still brick), and transportation to the city was via the Chicago and North Western, the Elevated (which stopped at Linden Avenue in Wilmette) and the Chicago North Shore and Milwaukee Electric Railroad (now defunct). Hence, for the few Jewish families, attending Temple services was difficult and religious education for their children was nonexistent.

A meeting was held in 1920 to form a congregation, primarily for providing religious education for the children, but also to provide for religious services, especially at the High Holidays. Those attending the organizational meeting came from affluent families, many of whom were members of Lake Shore and Northmoor Country Clubs, and families many of whom were not so affluent. They all had in common a solid German background at a time when assimilation into the predominately Christian community was a way of life. World War I was over, and becoming good American citizens, blending into the American way of life, was important.

From that meeting came the founding of our congregation, which was known then as the North Shore Branch of Sinai Congregation. The 46 founding families had connections with Temple Sinai on the south side of Chicago, were guided in their formative period by members and Rabbis of that congregation, and considered themselves to be a branch of Sinai.

Religious School & Break from Sinai:

Religious school was held in one of the Winnetka Public Schools. Teachers were primarily volunteers, and the membership grew at a rapid pace. Within a few years, the number of members had increased to more than 250 families with about the same number of children in the religious school. It became evident that a permanent building was needed. North Shore Congregation Israel was formally organized as a separate congregation with no formal ties to Temple Sinai. Land was purchased in Glencoe, and a new synagogue (it wasn't called a synagogue back then) was dedicated at the corner of Lincoln and Vernon in 1928, just before the stock market crash that heralded the Great Depression.

Despite that trauma, membership grew steadily and slowly up to and through World War II. By the end of that period, NSCI had around 500 member families, and about the same number of children in religious school. The membership was cohesive for the most part, though some evidence of change was already apparent. The Temple had "Sunday School" and religious services for members on Sunday morning. There was no Bar or Bat Mitzvah, no teaching of Hebrew (and precious little in the services either), Confirmation Services and some celebration of a few of the Festivals. Outwardly, the

Temple was little different from the churches around it.

Changes Taking Place:

However, changes were taking place internally. The Cantor (there was one with a small choir from the start) came out from behind the bimah to sing in plain view of the congregation. The dark suit worn by the Rabbi was covered by a robe (several Trustees stormed out of services to express their disapproval). The ultimate happened -- to stop competition with golf on Sunday morning; services were changed back to Friday evening. About one third of the Board resigned! Nevertheless, the Congregation prospered, differences were resolved, and growth continued slowly until right after World War II. Then, the explosion in membership started.

Membership Increasing:

Jewish families started moving to the suburbs in increasingly large numbers right after World War II. Moreover, there was no congregation, Reform, Conservative, or Traditional, north of the Chicago city limits, except North Shore Congregation Israel. Our membership grew at a staggering pace. While this was good for our financial health, it posed problems. High Holiday Services had to be held at New Trier High School's auditorium. Though at first, our small auditorium on Vernon Avenue could accommodate the congregation in two services. In 1952, a fundraising campaign enabled the construction of a new classroom wing, a social hall, and new offices. That soon became too small. We attained a membership of over 1,850 families, with nearly 2,000 children in our religious school. The Board of Trustees (much smaller than now and generally comprising members with years of experience in Temple affairs) considered closing our membership. After much debate, it was regretfully concluded that we simply could not function with more than 2,000 children in religious school, and we would close our membership when we reached that number of children. We never did; our peak was something more than 1,950, and our membership remained open to all who wished to join.

Impact of Change:

Many other changes were also taking place. A large proportion of the new membership came from backgrounds quite different from those of the original members. This was true in a geographical sense. Many of the new members were second generation Americans and a few third generations whose parents had lived in ethnic neighborhoods in Chicagoland, and whose grandparents had come from widely varying parts of Europe. It was also true in a religious sense. The new members brought a richly diverse Jewish heritage to North Shore Congregation Israel. Traditional and Conservative Synagogues did not meet the needs of many young members whose parents followed those paths of worship. However, many of the "ultra" reform practices of NSCI left the new members uncomfortable and as they became active in the leadership of the Temple, they instituted changes. In turn, many of the older members

were equally uncomfortable with the new order of things. The impact of all this on NSCI was profound.

Expansion Late 1950s:

Over a period of some 25 years, growth dictated the establishment of a Board of Religious Education to manage the Religious School, rather than the Sisterhood under whose auspices it had been before. Both the Sisterhood and the Men's Club (re-designated as the Brotherhood) have emerged as strong supportive auxiliaries of the Temple and its Board of Trustees. Additional auxiliaries have been formed, especially a Young Couples Club. A decision to stop using public facilities for our worship, in line with separation of church and state, plus continued growth in the religious school, led to a decision to expand again in the late 1950s.

Initially, because we could not find suitable space and had affirmed a decision to remain in Glencoe, we purchased all the property around the Lincoln-Vernon site, and planned to construct an additional building there. Before we were too far along with those plans, an opportunity arose to purchase the present property, which we did. The new facilities were built on Sheridan Road. When costs came in much higher than anticipated (some things never change), the decision was made to build Phase I (completed in 1964), with Phase II postponed. Another 18 years later, we had completed our facilities through the Arise and Build campaign (Phase II). This was the completion of the Rebecca Crown Hall (Social Hall), the Sisterhood Kitchen, along with the Perlman sanctuary, which was dedicated in 1982, although changing Temple population and needs dictated a different structure for completion than initially contemplated.

Changes of Worship Practices:

Internal modifications continued to be profound. In the late 1950s, Hebrew was started, along with a Bar and Bat Mitzvah program. Worship format underwent many changes, with increased use of Hebrew, more widely varied music and increased emphasis on traditional Jewish holidays.

Because of all these changes, we are a vastly different congregation today than when we were founded. While the changes are too numerous to detail, the rate of change has been erratic but continual (in the best traditions of Reform practice), and the trauma considerable. Many of the older members were so uncomfortable with the changes that they left the congregation. In many instances, this exodus led to the formation of new congregations, again with a rather cohesive structure in worship practice, school training, and scope of activities. New congregations arose on the North Shore in the Conservative and Traditional mode. As changes took place in those synagogues also, members dissatisfied with their changes left. Many joined North Shore Congregation Israel. As a result, this congregation has continued to grow and to make a real contribution both to the secular life of our community, and to the life of Reform Jewry locally in this midwestern area, nationally, and even internationally.

Roots of the Congregation:

We remain the great melting pot for Jewry on the Chicago North Shore. While this imposes, problem solving on the Board of Trustees, there is a constant awareness of the roots of the congregation and the fact that many of the original families are still represented among the membership and make a continuing contribution (both financial and in participation) to the life of NSCI. It imposes a restriction (not necessarily to our detriment) that can and should control the rate of change that we undergo. However, it is also true that this rich and varied background of our members is one of the great strengths that will maintain North Shore Congregation Israel as one of the distinguished and illustrious congregations of our country.

With all the change, all the problems and all the successes (and some failures) we have had, it is instructive to read some of the minutes of Board of Trustee meetings from the early days. Change a name here, a decimal place there, and one can see that what our fathers and mothers struggled with then, we, in our own way, are struggling with today. Some problems never change. What our founding parents gave us we must cultivate and extend in our own right that we may leave it to the next generations to follow.

Building for the Generation:

We are in the 21st Century and NSCI has been experiencing growing pains once again. With our existing facilities in need of upgrading, to keep up with modern times, to be more energy efficient and due to the lack of space for family education, our congregation once again was in expansion mode. The first phase of a massive building campaign, the “Building for Generation,” project, was to renovate the Perlman Sanctuary and make the bimah in the main sanctuary accessible to everyone. This was accomplished in 2006 - 2007.

Phase II of the “Building for Generation,” began with the ground breaking of the new Tross Family Education Center on September 7, 2008. At the end of the summer of 2009, the educational offices moved to their new facilities next to the Family Gathering Place (former library). The final phase of the “Building for Generations” project was going to be the remodeling of the existing school building, which has been put on hold. In the summer of 2017, however, the school had air conditioning installed.

90th Anniversary:

In 2010, North Shore Congregation Israel celebrated the 90th Anniversary of the congregation. This was a yearlong commemoration of looking back at our long history with pride. Our congregation has had significant impact on American Jewry. Since 1931, the congregation has had only five Senior Rabbis which, itself, is astonishing. These four men, Rabbi Charles E. Shulman, Dr. Edgar Siskin, Rabbi Herbert Bronstein, Rabbi Steven S. Mason, and one woman, our current Rabbi Wendi Geffen, are all scholars

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who have made an impact on Reform Judaism.

50 Years at 1185 Sheridan Road:

The 50th Anniversary of the opening of the Main Sanctuary was commemorated on June 21, 2014, with a dinner dance.

Change in Leadership:

The congregation has moved into another transition upon the retirement of Senior Rabbi Steven Mason on June 31, 2015. Rabbi Wendi Geffen was chosen as the next Senior Rabbi of NSCI, the first female Senior Rabbi in the 95 years' history of this congregation. Rabbi Geffen, Rabbi Lisa Greene, Rabbi Ryan Daniels and Cantor David Goldstein are energetically leading the congregation into the future as we maintain our spirituality within an evolving Jewish tradition and express our Jewish values by active participation in all areas of congregational life.

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