

Early History of Project Ezra at Temple Isaiah

The Temple Isaiah tradition of preparing Christmas holiday dinners and delivering them to people throughout the community began more than 25 years ago. While early on there were two parallel initiatives, the wonderful tradition we recognize today as Project Ezra can be traced to the personal effort of long-time temple congregant, Howard Smith.

In the mid-1980s the Social Action Committee, chaired at that time by Toby and Bruce Ward, recruited congregants to take part in an initiative sponsored by the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts (SCM), Project Ezra. Begun in the early 1980s, the goal of Project Ezra was to have synagogue member help out at hospitals, homeless shelters, food kitchens, and other social service sites so that Christian staff could spend the holiday with their families. In the late 1980s the Social Action Committee, now chaired by Alan Millner, continued to recruit volunteers for Project Ezra.

In 1989 Elaine and Howard Smith were members of Temple Emunah. On 22 December of that year Howard surmised that a long-time client of his veterinary practice would be alone and likely without a holiday dinner. He further surmised there were others in the community who also would not have a Christmas dinner. The next day Howard had the names of about 50 people in need of a holiday dinner. He had gone to the town's Human Services Department and, with the help of Lexington selectman, Bill Dailey, to St. Brigid Church. He contacted Norman Myerow, head of the bakery department of the Minuteman Technical School, who provided rolls, cake, and cookies – at no charge. Howard went himself to Stop and Shop in Bedford where he purchased (which the store sold at cost) sliced turkey, potato salad, cole slaw, cranberry sauce, and more. So, on Christmas Eve, Howard and Elaine prepared 50 Christmas meals, which they, along with Elaine's cousins, Steve and Ben Romansky (Isaiah members), delivered on Christmas Day.

In 1990 Elaine and Howard had become members of Temple Isaiah. Social action had always been a part of Howard's life in Lexington. As the next holiday approached he spoke to Jeff Goldberg, the committee chair at that time, about what had happened the previous year. Jeff realized that other temple members would want to help, and arranged as well to have the Social Action Committee cover costs. As he had done a year earlier, Howard did all the preliminary work – gathering names, and sourcing the food. On Christmas Eve about ten people, mostly the Smith's friends, helped prepare 70 holiday meals. And on Christmas morning Temple Isaiah members arrived to make the deliveries. In just two years the scope of what Howard had started had grown so much it became obvious the project could not continue in his home, and so Howard asked Jeff about moving it to the Temple. Not only did Jeff concur, he gave the name Project Ezra to the local initiative. That occurred in 1991. Since then there has been a succession of dedicated people chairing the project and an uncounted number of adults, youth, and children who cooked, assembled, and delivered the meals. While parents assembled meals, children decorated the delivery packages with drawings and ribbons, capturing for them the festiveness of the holiday season and the love of doing mitzvah. A decade or so ago Temple Shir Tikvah began its partnership in the project. And so each year as our temple members prepare holiday meals for others, it is good to recall that what we know as Project Ezra draws its name from an early initiative by the larger Jewish community, and traces its beginning here to Howard Smith, who, along with Elaine, began what has become a most meaningful tradition of serving our neighbors in need.

R. Bruce Ward, 3 November 2016