



August 25, 2020

FAQS: CHANGES TO CLERGY STAFFING

To Our Temple Sinai Congregation,

Since our announcement about the board's decision not to renew Cantor Berman's contract, we have received several calls and emails with a variety of questions. We hope that you will take the time to read the following information. As we get new questions, we will continue to answer and update.

We want to help our spiritual community through this time of change and transition and avoid rumors or wrong information.

Question: What will Cantor Berman's departure mean for music at Temple Sinai?

Answer: We understand that you are concerned with and have questions about the decision to not extend Cantor Berman's contract and that we will be sorry to see her leave at the end of June 2021. We understand how much music is a part of our services and culture; it was before Cantor Berman joined Temple Sinai and it will continue to be after her departure. Two examples: the monthly Mostly Musical Shabbat was initiated about 12 years ago; the Band and Choir have been mainstays for many years. From July 1, 2021 and moving forward, we will ensure that our musical needs are met. This may be a combination of our band and choir being more in the forefront; engaging the service of a "freelance" cantor for High Holidays; working with the American Conference of Cantors (ACC), the organization for cantors in the Reform movement, to bring in guest cantors; or engaging a soloist to assist with services. We are enthusiastic about exploring the options and ideas of how we can enhance and enrich our music programming.

Question: Does this mean that music is taking a back seat at Temple Sinai?

Answer: Music has been, still is and will continue to be important at Temple Sinai. During this period of transition we will explore ways to continue our musical programming and offer new opportunities to fully embrace the music of the Reform movement. We are not abandoning music, but will look for ways to expand, grow and be innovative.

Question: We understood that the cantorial program was underwritten by a donor; what happened?

Answer: As you may be aware, Edgar Snyder's contribution to our music program is just that – support of our musical program. While it has been a generous gift, it doesn't begin to cover the salary of an ordained cantor or the other professionals that support Temple Sinai's music program.

Question: What about Rabbi Keren Gorban?

Answer: Rabbi Gorban's contract was extended until June 30, 2022 (a one year extension). This will help ensure continuity in pastoral and life cycle care, as well as oversight of our youth education program, along with our interim Rabbi Darryl Crystal, until we bring on a new senior rabbi.

Question: Why haven't we known about any budget issues?

Answer: At the annual meeting, we were quite transparent about Temple Sinai's finances and offered to share more detailed information with anyone who requested it. Congregations our size typically employ two full-time ordained clergy. Our financials are normal for a congregation our size in a city with the size of our Jewish population and, in fact, we are considered a good model of financial responsibility. While we are stable, we must be prepared to meet any potential long term challenges.

Question: If we are not in trouble, why aren't we continuing Cantor Berman's contract?

Answer: We have more clergy than we can afford and now are right sizing - making a responsible adjustment that is sad but necessary. We have had contractual restrictions that prevented us from making this decision sooner. Our goal is to remain fiscally responsible and to match Temple Sinai revenues with expenses for the long term. That will ensure a healthy congregation for years to come.

To reiterate, and to put it simply, we cannot afford the salary and expenses of three full-time ordained clergy. Thanks to our successful Torah project fundraising effort, our deficit was not in the six figures for the fiscal year that ended in June, but will be in the current fiscal year with the existing clergy payroll. Whenever there is a shortfall, as in the past couple years, we must take a higher draw from our endowment (Fund for the Future) to offset it. This draw must be reduced if the Endowment is to remain strong for the future. Furthermore, in order to help cover this year's deficit, the board has approved other one-time measures that cannot be repeated.

Question: Some congregants have discussed a fundraiser to keep Cantor Berman – why aren't we pursuing this?

Answer: In order to ensure a secure fiscal future for our spiritual community, we follow best practices in long-term budgeting and work hard to avoid a "Band-Aid" approach, as a one-time solution to address an ongoing need. For this reason, our expenses must be based on a sustainable revenue stream and not one-time fundraising efforts. This sometimes means making difficult decisions based on our income and budget – to do anything less would be irresponsible and jeopardize the long-term health of Temple Sinai. We need to live within our means.

Question: Are we losing members – is this causing a problem?

Answer: We have kept up with all the studies about the state of the Pittsburgh Jewish community and national data about declining synagogue membership in general. We once were (more than seven years ago) at a peak membership of about 800 families and have maintained between 725-740 households for the last several years. Frankly, no other Reform congregation in the region supports three clergy. It is important to note that we certainly have remained among the most stable congregations in terms of our membership and financial health.

Question: Was replacing dues with pledge the right move?

Answer: Some people have questioned our financial security and the viability of pledge vs. dues. We must reiterate that we take our fiduciary responsibilities very seriously. We believe that pledge has helped Temple Sinai attract new members, as well as retain members, partially due to eliminating the need to request adjustments, sparing any embarrassment. It has not resulted in a material change to revenues compared to the former Dues Model. The average pledge was \$1,400 per household in 2019-2020, which is about the same as what Temple Sinai received in dues per household in 2016. The sustaining amount per household (i.e. the amount required to meet all of the synagogue's expenses) is almost double that. Pledge commitments from newer members tend to be lower than those of long-time members, many of whom pay the sustaining amount as they did under the dues system. Even before we went to a pledge system, dues income was declining. We found that people tended to "self-adjust" their dues, without explicitly committing to a specific amount. We suspect that dues income would be on a par with pledge income given this economy and in particular, the pandemic. As expected, each year, expenses tend to increase.

Question: Have you considered closing our religious school to save money?

Answer: We have been asked if we considered eliminating Next Dor as a cost savings measure and joining J-JEP, the Joint Jewish Education Program. After thorough analysis, we concluded that we would not save any money, given the amount we would be required to contribute to be a part of J-JEP. Congregations that are a part of J-JEP underwrite the cost of their students, just like Temple Sinai does with its own school. In addition, religious school is often the entry point for younger families, and we believe in keeping our program as long as it's feasible. Parents of religious school students have told us that it is important to them that Temple Sinai has its own religious school program. Also, during the pandemic, we do not want our kids to have to make another adjustment in their lives.

Question: What else can we expect during this transition?

Answer: We are in a period of change for which we have been preparing since Rabbi Gibson announced his retirement. This is the first of several decisions that will need to be made over the next couple of years. As we conduct our senior rabbi search, continuity of pastoral care and life cycle events is critical, and leadership believes the community would best be served by two rabbis during our transitional period. Once we hire our senior rabbi, and depending on that person's skill set, we will be reviewing what is needed to move us forward, taking into great consideration the needs of the congregation, our culture and our viability to thrive. Music and particularly, music in the Reform tradition, always will be an important part of the equation. We will be working together as a community to ensure we continue our culture of inspiration, innovation and inclusion.