

Interfaith nurturing rabbi set to retire

Hickman led Temple Israel for nearly 20 years

J.D. Gallop

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For nearly 20 years, Rabbi Patricia Hickman guided congregants at Temple Israel through life, and death, while nurturing a growing interfaith movement on the Space Coast.

Now Hickman, one of three primary rabbis who serve Brevard's Jewish community, is set to retire as spiritual leader of the Viera congregation.

"She's very personable, very engaging. She's a friend and a confidant of the congregants. There are a lot of tight relationships," said Michael Slotkin, president of the 57-year-old Reform congregation.

A retirement gala was May 22, with her husband and daughter attending along with other family members and congregants. Hickman, a cantor, sang joyously with her daughter and husband before guests.

"I've reached a ripe age and feel its time to move on and slow down a little bit and explore some of the things that I've never had time to do," Hickman told FLORIDA TODAY.

"I'll still be connected to the congregation. We are planning on staying in

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Brevard for now," Hickman said, who will serve as rabbi emeriti and teach occasionally. During her time at Temple Israel, Hickman taught hundreds of children and adults. In one of her tikkuns – a book used to prepare reading from the Hebrew language Torah or Five Books of Moses – was filled with little notes scribbled with the names of her students.

"It's a book that you use to chant from during Torah training. It's just filled with notes. It's just been a joy," Hickman said.

Hickman, who attended the Manhattan School of Music where she received a degree in music, joined the congregation as a cantor, chanting

traditional melodies and more modern songs by Jewish artists such as Debbie Friedman.

She received her master's degree in sacred music from Hebrew Union College. She was ordained as a rabbi in 2012.

The 140-family congregation has already selected a new rabbi, Brett Tancer of Jupiter, to take on the role of spiritual leader. Hickman also helped build relationships with clergy in other faiths.

"Definitely my interfaith work has been a major part of serving the community," she said of her work with the non-profit group Interfaith United which brought Jews, Christians, Muslims and others together for community meetings and prayer events.

The group held prayer memorials in the wake of terrorist attacks and joined together for Thanksgiving services.

One of the more difficult matters for Hickman was selling the Viera synagogue – one of three primary congregations – and then migrating to another on-site, smaller building.

The original synagogue, which sat on a tract of land on Lake Andrew Drive that once was a cow pasture, was built in 1996 and sold in 2018 to the Chabad of the Space and Treasure Coasts.

"She led us through that," Slotkin said.

The new building, about 8,500 square feet, sits on a 2-acre parcel of land behind the original temple.

Hickman, like others in faith leadership, found the last few years of her tenure a struggle as she worked to balance the life cycles at the synagogue with the impact of COVID-19, with its mask mandates, calls for vaccinations, and quarantines. The synagogue was emptied of congregants and services were relegated to YouTube live streaming.

"The whole COVID experience was extremely difficult. There was a tremendous concern about in-person services. I learned a lot about the virtual world. But at the same time there was a lot of growth for me personally, a lot of reflection," Hickman said.

Now Hickman is working on a book, an autobiographical look at the issues she's dealt with over the years. She also wants to delve more into blog writing and topics centered around aging.

"She still is going to be a member of the community here," Slotkin said.

"So there will still be that connection. She's really maintained the congregation."

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Rabbi Patricia Hickman



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