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## Temple turns to pledges to replace dues

By Carter Smith

In an unusual move, the membership of Temple Beth Abraham in Tarrytown voted earlier this month to move away from the traditional membership dues policy and will be asking members for voluntary contributions instead. According to Rabbi David Holtz, his synagogue will become one of the first in the Hudson Valley to do so.

Temple Beth Abraham, which was incorporated as an Orthodox synagogue in 1899, is now affiliated with the Union for Reform Judaism. Its current building, just off Broadway/Route 9 on Leroy Avenue, is its third location. Today the organization serves more than 400 families and offers services in both the Reform and Conservative traditions. According to Holtz, who has been Beth Abraham's rabbi since 1993, more than half of his congregants live in Irvington, Ardsley, Dobbs Ferry or Hastings, with about a quarter of the congregation coming from Irvington alone. "We draw from 26 zip codes," he added.

By way of context, Holtz explained that over the course of the American Jewish community's 350 years, there have been many ways that synagogues have supported themselves, including membership dues, a custom that is about 75 years old.

"Dues seemed like the most stable — you figured out your budget, you kind of divided it among your membership and said this is what we need from everybody," Holtz explained. "You know that some people are going to not be able to afford that, and some people will be able to give more, but the most important



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Rabbi David Holtz at Temple Beth Abraham

thing about that from my perspective was that no one was ever turned away if they didn't have that money. We have members who pay nothing, we have members who pay \$10 a month, we have members that give \$10,000 a year. So it varies greatly."

Dues for 2014-2015 were as follows: Family: \$3,396; Senior Family (oldest member of the family is at least age 68): \$3,231; Single: \$1,940; and Senior Single (over 68): \$1,847.

Temple Beth Abraham also has various other discounted categories of membership for long-term members (more than 30 years), and another (the "gateway") for newcomers, which includes joint membership at the temple and at the Jewish Community Center on the Hudson.

However, the congregation began to feel that their dues were not so much a charitable contribution as a membership, according to Holtz. "Similar to a country club, I pay a certain amount,"

he said of this attitude, "and I expect a certain level of service, and if I'm not using it that much, than it's probably not worth me belonging anymore."

To Holtz, however, that's not how a faith community should engage. "We ought to be a community where people support us to the level they can and want to because they believe in our mission, they believe in the importance of having synagogues for Jews, because they believe in having educations, etc."

For Holtz, it's all about raising community, rather than simply raising money. "As soon as you send someone a bill, you change the relationship. We believe ourselves to be a family, we believe ourselves to be a community. We've always said we won't turn someone away, but people who are struggling are often just embarrassed. So instead of belonging, they walk away. That breaks my heart — especially if it's someone who's struggling.

That's a person who may need a congregation."

Under the new system, members of Temple Beth Abraham will receive a pledge sheet and choose how much they will pledge for the year, instead of paying an assigned amount in a specific membership category.

While the pledge policy officially takes effect at the start of the next fiscal year, which begins on July 1, the congregation is accepting members on those terms immediately.

"We are now Jews without dues, but as an institution we are not Jews without financial needs," temple president Herb Baer, a resident of Tarrytown, wrote in a press release. "The success of this model will rely upon fostering a culture of deep connections and generosity, and not a series of transactions where individuals see their financial commitment as a fee for service."

"What our synagogue does, both for our members and in the larger community, is more important today than it has ever been," Holtz said. "We need to do a better job in making that clear, in creating strong personal connections, and in removing any barriers to a sense of inclusivity. One way to begin is to make sure everyone knows that belonging to our community is not about finances."

Refocusing and redefining what it means to belong, Holtz anticipates, will have a variety of dividends.

"In the end, we're hoping people will contribute the same as, or even more than, they've been contributing," Holtz concluded, "because they want to, and not because we sent them a bill."