

FACT Case Studies of Congregations Engaging Young Adults **Next Dor DC at Temple Micah, Washington DC**

By Ramie Arian

This case study profiles a project called Next *Dor* DC, a program to engage people in their 20s and 30s sponsored by Temple Micah (hereinafter sometimes referred to simply as “Micah”), a Reform Jewish congregation located at 2829 Wisconsin Avenue NW, Washington DC 20007. The clergy team of Temple Micah is headed by Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel, senior rabbi. Rabbi Esther L. Lederman is assistant rabbi, and holds principle responsibility for guiding Next *Dor* DC. (*Dor* is a Hebrew word meaning “generation.”)

In 2009, the congregation was named by *Newsweek* as one of the 25 most dynamic Jewish congregations in the United States. The congregation’s website offers this description: “Temple Micah... is a Reform Jewish congregation dedicated to the spiritual fulfillment of its members. We value religious observance enhanced by social action, intellectual challenge, lifelong Jewish learning and beautiful music. Our diverse and welcoming community nurtures personal connections through active participation in a vibrant temple life.” (Temple Micah web site)

Elsewhere on the website, the description continues: “Temple Micah is a teaching, caring and doing congregation. We are at once traditional and innovative, combining a good helping of time-honored ritual with groundbreaking, new approaches to Jewish life. We put a premium on creativity, experimentation and learning. We urge every member to join us in a meaningful religious journey and to build personal connections through active participation in the life of our community... We have fun. We delight in delicious food, and raise money by preparing gourmet meals for each other. Exquisite music adds beauty and emotional richness to our services...”

Key Data

Temple Micah currently has some 520 member families. Regular worship is held every Shabbat (Sabbath), with services on Friday evening and Saturday morning, and on Jewish holidays. Typically, Temple Micah hosts approximately 100 worshipers on Friday evening. On Saturday mornings when there is no Bar/Bat Mitzvah, attendance is in the range of 40-50; when there is a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, attendance ranges from 125-250, depending on the number of guests. As is typical in Jewish congregations, worship attendance for the High Holidays (Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, which occur in the Fall, 10 days apart) is significantly higher, usually by a factor of at least 10. (Bar Mitzvah [for boys] and Bat Mitzvah [for girls] are coming-of-age ceremonies which are celebrated around the 13th birthday. It is typical for the family of the young person being so honored to invite a large number of guests to attend the Shabbat morning service, and to host a reception which follows.)

Temple Micah conducts regular Shabbat evening worship on Friday evenings at 6:30, preceded by an Oneg Shabbat at 6. Literally translated as “joy of the Sabbath,” an Oneg Shabbat is a light collation which presents an opportunity for socializing in connection with worship. Micah’s choice to offer the Oneg Shabbat prior to worship is unusual; most Jewish congregations hold an Oneg Shabbat following worship. Shabbat morning worship is at 10:15 on Saturdays.

Temple Micah designates the second Shabbat of each month as Next *Dor* Sabbath. On those occasions, next-generation participants represent 15% to 20% of the congregation. Special programs conducted for the Next *Dor* DC group generally attract 20 to 30 participants.

Over the past five years, the Temple’s membership has been growing by about 25 families, or about 5%, per year. The congregation has some 40 members who are in their 20s and 30s whose membership can be attributed directly to their participation in Next *Dor* DC, though Temple Micah is explicit that increasing membership is **not** a goal of the Next *Dor* DC program (see below). Another 15 people in this age cohort have joined as members of the congregation, but subsequently relocated away from the DC area. This represents a 10-fold increase in membership in this age cohort from before the advent of the Next *Dor* DC program.

As the Temple Micah constituency is overwhelmingly English-speaking, all activities are conducted in English. As is typical in Jewish congregations, worship is conducted in a combination of English and Hebrew.

Demographics and Culture

Temple Micah has never had deep connections with its neighborhood, but rather has always been something of a “destination synagogue” which serves Jews from all around the District of Columbia and its environs who are looking for an unconventional and forward-thinking approach to Jewish life. At one time, the synagogue printed bumper stickers which read: “Temple Micah: It’s Worth the Schlep.” (“Schlep” is a Yiddish word which roughly translates as “trek.”)

The constituency of the congregation is largely Caucasian, though there is a notable minority of Jews of color. In general, the community is a well-educated constituency of professional class, college graduates. The community includes many interfaith families, and many Jews-by-choice. The District of Columbia is a gathering place for people who come from many places of origin, and Temple Micah is no exception. A significant number of participants are essentially transient, arriving (and expecting to depart) with the incumbent political administration. The community is of mixed economic means, from working class to wealthy. The congregation attracts Jews from a mixture of professions, notably including government workers, teachers, lawyers, and professionals in the large DC not-for-profit sector.

Background and History

Temple Micah was established in 1963 by a group of young Jews who had moved to the District of Columbia in the early 1960s, propelled by the visions of Presidents John F. Kennedy's New Frontier and Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society. Its founders envisioned that Temple Micah would be a Jewish voice for what its members were doing in their professional lives. From the beginning, the congregation strove to be "not your parents' synagogue." Originally located in the Southwest quadrant of DC, Micah partnered with—and met within the building of—St. Augustine's Episcopal Church.

The congregation always described itself as a congregation for "everybody," which was intended to mean that it was not just for "families." This has always been a part of the congregation's history and identity. (In the 1950s and especially in the 1960s, the Jewish community saw a massive demographic shift from the cities to the suburbs, and a corresponding rise in suburban congregations, which catered overwhelmingly to stereotypical nuclear families. Temple Micah set itself apart by intentionally bucking this trend, taking a welcoming stance toward singles and the many others who did not live in "traditional" families.)

The congregation's first two clergy were Rabbi Richard G. Hirsch, founding director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism and honorary life president of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, and Rabbi Bernard Mehlman, now Rabbi Emeritus of Temple Israel of Boston. Rabbis Hirsch and Mehlman are both dynamic, charismatic figures who are noted for their courage and dedication to social action. Rabbi Daniel Zemel has led the congregation since 1983.

Micah moved from its original location at St. Augustine's to its present location near the National Cathedral in 1995. In the 16 years since, the congregation has grown more than four-fold, from 120 to 520 member families.

As the founding membership aged, the congregation began frequently to grapple with the question of how to remain age-diverse. During the summer of 2000, responding to concerns about attracting younger members, Rabbi Zemel and his wife Louise began to invite newcomers and strangers who attended Friday evening services to come back to their home for Shabbat dinner. Usually, the invitees mainly included young people who were in town for one of DC's many summer internships. This developed into a group for young people in their 20s and 30s, which met monthly in the rabbi's home for a program of Jewish text study, discussion and food. The group continued successfully for about one and a half years. Rabbi Zemel endeavored at that time to induce the group to undertake its own leadership. This effort was unsuccessful, and the group floundered and was discontinued. Some years later, when Temple Micah engaged its first, half-time assistant rabbi, she was given responsibility to revive the young adult group, but this effort floundered.

In 2008, Rabbi Zemel was approached by the leadership of a national organization called Synagogue 3000 (S3K), which describes itself as "a catalyst for excellence,

empowering congregations and communities to create synagogues that are sacred and vital centers of Jewish life.” S3K had identified engagement of the next generation as a key priority for synagogues across North America, and was establishing a pilot program called *Next Dor* to experiment with bringing more people of the 20s and 30s age group into synagogue life. *Next Dor* invited Micah to be one of its first cohort of pilot sites across the United States. As an incentive to participate, S3K offered to pay a portion of the salary for a full-time assistant rabbi, part of whose assignment would be to lead a *Next Dor* group in the congregation.

In response to this opportunity, the congregation made the decision to engage a second, full-time rabbi, and reached out to Esther Lederman, a young rabbi with a strong background in community organizing. She joined Temple Micah as Assistant Rabbi in the summer of 2009. A significant part of her assignment is to provide leadership for *Next Dor* DC, which has been active since her arrival.

The Next *Dor* DC "Ministry"

Rabbis Lederman and Zemel emphasize that Temple Micah’s efforts to engage young people in their 20s and 30s is not about offering programs, but rather, about building relationships. Accordingly Micah’s initiative begins with one-on-one relationship-building initiated by Rabbi Lederman. She identifies individuals who have visited the synagogue, or who have been referred to her by one of the *Next Dor* group’s current participants, or who cross her “radar screen” in any other way. She contacts such persons individually, and invites them to coffee, usually for a 30-minute conversation in a convenient location, usually near their place of work. The discussion focuses on where the individual is from, who they are, what they’re interested in, and whether they are looking for something deeper with regard to the Jewish religion or the Jewish community. She makes it clear that she does not have an agenda to “sell” them. Sometimes these conversations are one-off encounters, and she never sees the individual again; sometimes they lead to the individual’s decision to connect in some way with the *Next Dor* group, with the synagogue, with the rabbi, or with Jewish life.

As noted above, Temple Micah designates the second Friday evening of each month as *Next Dor* Shabbat, and especially invites young people of the 20s and 30s age group to join the congregation in worship. The synagogue’s worship services always have an informal style, and are notable both for the presence of humor and for particular attention to the music, mostly in a style which invites and encourages congregational participation. **There is no change to the worship’s style or content for *Next Dor* Shabbat**, but both of the rabbis report that the presence of a significant cohort in their 20s and 30s generates a distinctly different feeling during the worship experience, as the young people bring their energy, their humor, and their way of being.

Following the worship service on such occasions, the *Next Dor* participants are invited to a casual Shabbat dinner, sometimes going out together to a restaurant, occasionally organized as a pot-luck at a participant’s home, but increasingly, staying at the synagogue and ordering in food. These meals are given structure by Rabbi Lederman,

as follows: (1) They begin with an icebreaker exercise, usually with a focus on introducing people and learning one another's names. (2) The group shares some songs together. (3) Rabbi Lederman leads a brief study session, usually focusing on the weekly Torah portion (scriptural reading). (4) The meal is shared. (5) There is a focus on connecting people to one another and building relationships.

On occasion, the time and place may shift. Once in a while, this kind of sharing will take place at Havdallah; occasionally it may take place over a Sunday brunch. (Havdallah is a special, brief ceremony held after sundown on Saturday to mark the end of the Sabbath.)

A second kind of gathering for the Next *Dor* DC group is called "Drinks and Drash." ("Drash," pronounced to rhyme with "wash," is a Hebrew word meaning "interpretation," and is used to denote the process of studying and expanding upon a traditional, often Biblical, text.) This is a gathering which generally takes place on the first Monday of each month, and is located at a restaurant/bar which (unlike Temple Micah itself) is easily accessible to the Metro (DC's subway system), and convenient to where many of the participants work. It is publicized to potential participants through an email list which Rabbi Lederman maintains, through Facebook, and the like. The gathering centers on a study session organized, and often (but not always) taught by Rabbi Lederman, on various timely topics. Such topics have included: Religion in the Public Square; Judaism and Food Justice; and Jews in the Military. Discussion of politics is avoided.

About four times a year, the Next *Dor* DC group undertakes to participate in a social action project. These are typically one-off, hands-on projects. Examples are helping to paint a school, volunteering for a local social-service organization, and working at Micah House, a synagogue-owned half-way house for women coming out of homelessness or addiction. Rabbi Lederman notes that social action projects are less important for the Next *Dor* DC group than they might be for a comparable group in another city, as social action is what many of the participants are engaged with professionally.

Temple Micah sponsors special Next *Dor* worship services on the evenings of the High Holidays Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Attendance at these services is open without membership and without paid tickets. The services are conducted in the main sanctuary of Temple Micah by Rabbi Lederman and a visiting guest musician (the main services of the congregation for these holidays attract so many people that they do not fit in the synagogue, and are held instead in a much larger, nearby church). The Next *Dor* High Holiday services attract a "standing room only" crowd of about 400 members of the 20s-30s age group.

Understanding the Constituency

While the activities of Next *Dor* DC have changed relatively little in the three years they have been operating, the program's success tends to build on itself, so that increasing numbers of participants join in. This is aided, no doubt, by the caliber of the participants,

who (as Rabbi Zemel notes) are “not nerds: they’re very serious, very questioning, very interested.” In other words, they are the kind of people who attract peers to join them.

Although the gatherings have changed little in structure, the synagogue’s understanding of the constituency has evolved considerably. Rabbi Lederman notes that the 20s-30s participants are really not a single constituency with shared characteristics; rather, she says, there are three sub-groups among which it is important to distinguish:

1. Young married people who have very young children (this is the constituency in which Rabbi Lederman situates herself). These people’s core interests center on sorting out their lives, which have been radically shaken up by becoming parents; understanding the Jewish components of parenting; finding and building relationships with others in similar situations.
2. People in stable, committed couple relationships, whether married or not, gay or straight, who do not have children. These are generally people who have established or are establishing a relatively permanent home base in the DC area. Their career paths are becoming established. They have begun to develop settled roots, but may not yet have a network of relationships. They are looking for adult relationships with peers.
3. People who are not yet in stable, committed relationships. Often, they are at very early stages in their careers, and tend to change jobs frequently. In many senses, they are transients. They move often, and are involved in figuring out their own structures and patterns. Their interests are more social and their attention span is more short-term than those of the other groups.

Rabbi Lederman reports that it is difficult to create a group which caters to the needs of these three sub-populations at once.

Budget and Finances

The costs to Temple Micah for sponsoring the Next *Dor* DC project include half the salary of an Assistant Rabbi; \$10,000 to \$12,000 per year to hire a part-time outreach worker to support the Assistant Rabbi; \$15,000 annually in expenses for Next *Dor* High Holy Day worship services; and about \$2,500 annually in miscellaneous costs. Synagogue 3000 was initially contributing \$40,000 annually towards these expenses. The organization’s contribution is declining to zero over several years. Temple Micah has made the commitment to continue to fund the project fully as S3K support sunsets.

Underlying Philosophy

According to the Temple Micah website, the following principles undergird the Next *Dor* DC program:

1. *“Self-defined Jews* – We will not attempt to define who can be involved and who can’t; all are welcome whether people self-identify as Jews or are in the process of self-identifying as a Jew or are connected to Jews in some way.
2. *“Team-driven vision* – Although much of the initial vision is being provided by Rabbi Lederman, our goal is to aim for a vision of this community that includes the voices of all who are stake-holders in this work.
3. *“Low-Bar to Engagement* – Our intention is to remove any obstacles to people becoming a part of this vibrant community; we will aim to make events metro-accessible, affordable, and walk-in friendly.
4. *“Experiment and take risks* – we really only learn what ‘works’ when we explore what hasn’t been done, even it means making mistakes and learning along the way; this means any group of committed individuals who want to plan an event or try something new should begin making a plan!”

Factors and Key Dynamics Making for Success

Rabbis Zemel and Lederman attribute the success of Next *Dor* DC to its insistent pursuit of two key principles: (1) “Next *Dor* DC is a gateway, not a destination.” The group is meant to serve participants as a gateway **to Jewish life**, not as a gateway to Temple Micah. (2) Next *Dor* DC is about relationships, not about events or programs. Its goal is to support and encourage its participants in developing a “thick” network of relationships. “Thick” in this context is meant to denote deep, multi-layered relationships which involve an implicit sense of responsibility and reciprocity.

Temple Micah has always adopted a slightly unconventional, forward-thinking, somewhat irreverent stance, which is doubtless attractive to many young people. A standing, self-deprecating in-joke among the Micah staff is: “I’m not in favor of organized religion either—I work at Temple Micah!”

The synagogue’s lay leadership has always supported Next *Dor* DC as an expression of the synagogue’s responsibility to invest in the next generation and in the larger Jewish community. It has taken the highly unusual stance of eschewing the temptation to force the program to serve the synagogue’s institutional needs, and has resisted the temptation to make the program into a gateway to new membership in the synagogue. The sense that the synagogue is not “selling” something to participants is a key factor in keeping the group attractive.

Rabbi Zemel notes that success with this age cohort requires concentrated attention, and requires specialized skill sets. Rabbi Lederman is possessed of the requisite background and skills, and the synagogue has carved out an assignment for her which permits and expects that she devote the requisite concentrated attention.

What We Can Learn from Temple Micah and Next *Dor* DC

It is easy to see that Temple Micah is an unusual congregation. There are many ways in which the congregation is idiosyncratic, and it might therefore seem too much of an outlier to serve as a case study from which more typical congregations could learn.

For example, it is a congregation whose history and culture include an uncommon focus on youth and the contributions of members of the younger generation. Although nearly half a century has elapsed since the congregation's founding, the synagogue retains an unusual consciousness of, and appreciation for, the central role of young people in its establishment.

The synagogue has had the benefit of high-powered, charismatic rabbinic leadership for essentially all of its history. Additionally, there has been extraordinary stability of rabbinic leadership; the current senior rabbi has led the congregation for nearly three decades.

The congregation's location in Washington exposes it to congregants who represent an extraordinary pool of talent of the kind that is attracted to the District of Columbia, both for work within the government and its succession of administrations, and also for the vast array of not-for-profit agencies that are headquartered in the nation's capital.

Notwithstanding its above-noted idiosyncratic elements, there are many ways in which Temple Micah has built its Next *Dor* DC project that are wholly exemplary, in the sense that they serve as perfect exemplars of the principles which need to undergird programming for the 20s and 30s generation in order for it to be successful.

For one thing, Temple Micah demonstrates that a next generation project won't "just happen" spontaneously, but rather requires significant dedication of time, attention, resources and expertise. At Micah, these elements are provided by Rabbi Lederman, whose success would not be possible but for the fact that the synagogue has made it a priority. In other words, in order for the next generation project to succeed, there needs to be a decision at the highest level of congregational leadership to prioritize this work, and to dedicate the resources (of time, talent, energy and finances) required.

For a second thing, Temple Micah demonstrates that successful next generation outreach requires a specific skill-set of expertise and experience. Rabbi Lederman credits her background in community organizing for much of her approach to this work, and for its success. She says that a central principle of community organizing approach is never to do for a community of constituents what they are capable of doing for themselves. She notes that it is crucial to discern what next generation constituents can and cannot successfully do for themselves, as certain skills that are taken for granted in other (even only slightly older) generations are not necessarily widely available within this generation.

Third, Temple Micah demonstrates that a successful ministry to the 20s-30s generation must be a ministry that is about relationships, not about programs. People of this generation are over-programmed, and have too few opportunities to build genuine, satisfying, person-to-person, face-to-face relationships. Although this is a need they are generally not able to articulate, they respond to outreach that is grounded in genuine relationship-building. They are sensitive to hidden messages and resistant to sales pitches, so engagement must be genuine, and must not serve hidden agendas, such as growing the congregation's membership.

A fourth, corollary message is that in order to be successful in next generation engagement, the sponsoring congregation must undertake the project from motives related to the greater good of the community and of the individuals involved, and must eschew any intent for short-term, self-serving gain. In the case of Temple Micah, it is absolutely critical that both the synagogue's clergy and its board leadership have total clarity that short-term increase in the congregation's membership is not the goal of its next-generation outreach project. This is a particularly difficult message for many congregations, as it is natural for a board to take a position of resisting the expenditure of limited resources on projects unlikely to result in a visible return on investment, measured in the usual, fiscal terms. Challenging economic circumstances make this position much more difficult to resist.

Fifth, Temple Micah demonstrates that—in the Jewish community, at least—a project of engagement of 20s and 30s is most likely to succeed in an urban setting, where members of this generation are most likely to settle, at least temporarily. It is less clear how applicable this message is outside the Jewish community.

Sixth, the leadership of Temple Micah attributes the success of its *Next Dor DC* project at least in part to the casual informality of its worship space and style. As noted above, Temple Micah's worship is infused with humor and with music and with teaching. It is often interactive, and has a feeling-tone that often seems to echo what participants may have experienced (and appreciated) at summer camp.

Finally, the support of a central, national body (Synagogue 3000 in the case of Temple Micah's *Next Dor DC* program) has been immeasurably important in the success of the project. The central body has served many functions that have catalyzed the project at Temple Micah. (1) Identifying and naming the need to be filled: reaching out to engage the next generation in the life of the religious community. (2) Studying the extant literature on the topic, and identifying and articulating notable principles and practices; including, for example, the need for the work to be relationship-based rather than program-based; and the need to do the work for the sake of the greater good, not for short-term gain on the part of participating congregations. (3) Creating a community of practice which enables practitioners (in this case, Rabbi Lederman), to interact with and to learn from colleagues who are doing similar work—however differently—in other communities. (4) Generating a powerful incentive to initiate the work, in the form of financial grants to help underwrite the start-up costs of the project at the local level.

These seven elements—dedicated attention with adequate resources; outreach based in specialized skill-sets; a single-minded focus on relationship-building; commitment to doing the work for the sake of the greater good, not for short-term gain; the advantage of an urban setting; a style that is informal and which therefore projects a sense of being approachable; and the support of an outside body beyond the congregation—have proven to be critical in the success of Temple Micah’s Next *Dor* DC project.

Although Temple Micah is an unusual, idiosyncratic congregation, its successful engagement program for the 20s-30s generation clearly demonstrates the importance of these seven critical elements, each of which is potentially replicable in virtually any congregational setting. Any congregation seeking to create a successful next generation outreach would do well to be informed by these elements in the experience of Temple Micah.

Rabbi Ramie Arian works as a consultant specializing in projects to engage young people in religious life. Much of his work involves project management and/or research relating to programs of experiential education, including, for example, summer camps and travel education.

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