

Teachers schooled on needs of interfaith families



Conservative group stresses ‘outreach’ and sensitivity

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What does a Hebrew school teacher tell a Jewish child who is upset at the prospect of attending a wake for someone on the Christian side of his or her family?

How should a teacher respond when a student says, “One of the things we had for Passover dinner was ham”?

Questions like these were put to 40 religious school teachers in Livingston last week as part of a workshop on sensitizing educators who work with children of interfaith families.

The workshop, at Temple Beth Shalom, was sponsored by the Federation of Jewish Men’s Clubs. An arm of Conservative Judaism, FJMC has been out front within the movement in encouraging greater sensitivity to families with members from different religious traditions.

Its Keruv Institute (from a Hebrew word meaning “bringing closer” or “outreach”) runs seminars and training sessions for rabbis, synagogue lay leaders, and now educators. The programs are an acknowledgement that intermarried couples are increasingly becoming part of Conservative Jewish life.

“The teachers are on the front line; you are the first people who see the children from interfaith families,” said conference leader Lynne Wolfe as she opened the two-hour forum in a synagogue meeting hall.

Wolfe, a consultant for FJMC, is familiar to many in the MetroWest community. From 1991 to 2005 she directed Pathways, an outreach program for interfaith families sponsored by United Jewish Communities of MetroWest NJ.



Lynne Wolfe, a consultant for the Federation of Jewish Men’s Clubs, urges religious school teachers “to minimize anxiety and maximize the opportunity to engage our children and our friends and our friends’ children in Jewish life.”

Photos by Robert Wiener

Now living in Walnut Creek, Calif., Wolfe holds the title of “mentor” within the Keruv program.

“Children who grew up in Conservative congregations, who went to Hebrew school, who went to a program in Israel, who went to Solomon Schechter schools, were now in the greater world, and they are intermarried,” she told the teachers. “They found someone they loved, and the person they were marrying was not necessarily converting to Judaism.”

FJMC is credited with prodding the movement to embrace *keruv*, under the principle that the chances of a child in an interfaith home being raised Jewish will diminish if synagogues and schools don’t create a welcoming space for them. Two years ago, a movement-wide keruv subcommittee was created representing the four major Conservative organizations.

“If the teachers don’t know how to respond to these kids, they can hurt their children,” said Rabbi Charles Simon, FJMC executive director and an originator of the Keruv Initiative.

“If the teacher says, ‘You cannot do these things in your home’ and the student says, ‘We do these things in our home,’ if the teacher has handled it poorly, not only is Johnny going to be upset, but his parents are going to be upset, as they rightfully should be,” he told *NJJN* in a Sept. 16 phone interview. “This requires teachers’ developing a new sensitivity about how to respond to children in an age-appropriate manner when these situations arise.”

In 2006, Temple Beth Shalom joined the Keruv Coalition, made up of six local Conservative synagogues dedicated to increasing their outreach to households in which at least one member is not Jewish.

“We are reaching out to the early childhood educators because if they are more knowledgeable about *keruv*, they will be able to reach the kids and their families,” said Leah Beker, director of education at Beth Shalom.

After her introduction, Wolfe divided the teachers into three discussion groups to consider scenarios that have arisen in some preschool religious classes.

One group considered the wake scenario. “We need to be respectful of one another,” said a teacher. “The child should go as a sign of respect, regardless of what the religious aspects are.”

“You shouldn’t tell the child, ‘Jews don’t have those things,’” said another instructor.

Another group considered the ham on the Passover table.

“I don’t think it’s such a big deal,” one teacher responded. “Some of the families are kosher and some aren’t.”

“Maybe the fact they had a seder with the ham is better than not having a seder?” said a second instructor.

“Every year I teach the class what is kosher for Passover and what is not, and I had a parent come in and complain,” said a third. “She asked, ‘How can I tell them not to eat doughnuts on Passover?’”

Like the Passover scenario, the problems teachers encounter are not exclusive to interfaith families. Susan Sass, a kindergarten teacher at Beth Shalom, told *NJJN* she has confronted the issue of Halloween in her Sunday school class. Many Conservative rabbis and educators discourage Jewish youngsters from participating in the holiday, saying it celebrates Christian or pagan traditions.

“I’ll let them talk about it for a couple of minutes and then I’ll say, ‘OK, guys. Now we have to have our lesson about Shabbat or Yom Kippur or Sukkot,’” said Sass. “I just change the topic and keep the kids on task. I will let them know it is not a Jewish holiday and we don’t celebrate it here in Hebrew school.”

According to Simon, synagogues that use the Keruv program or those that have made independent outreach to interfaith families “have become more welcoming, more open, more sensitive to intermarried couples. Ten years ago, most intermarried couples who came to a Conservative shul couldn’t get in the front door. Now everybody is going to welcome them. That is a success story.”