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News Opinion Arts & Entertainment Community Special Focuses WJW Guides

U.S. ATTORNEY: EVIDENCE SHOWS N.Y. DISTRICT DIDN'T DEAL WITH STUDENT ANTI-SEMITISM | 1  
ULTRA-ORTHODOX WORLD | LOCKHEED MARTIN TO OPEN R&D CENTER IN ISRAEL | JOHANNSSC  
ADDRESSING OXFAM CRITICISM | HARVEY FIELDS, LONGTIME RABBI AT L.A. TEMPLE, DIES | MAJ  
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## Paying our fair share

Washington-area congregations are taking a fresh look at their financial models.

**By David Holzel**

*Senior writer*

They pay their fair share at [Beth El Hebrew Congregation](#) in Alexandria.

The Reform synagogue sets its annual dues at 1-1.5 percent of members' income, unless the member can't. Beth El avoids dues rates that could seem arbitrary.

But 1 percent of a lot is a lot. And Rabbi Brett Isserow says he encounters resistance from some members sticker shock.

"What has tended to happen is, they say, 'All the synagogue is worth to me is \$1,200. Take it or leave it,' " I of a fair share system."

To keep that member from walking, he says, "we have to be relaxed about the whole approach."

As synagogues around the Washington area send out their annual membership bills, Beth El has joined a around the country that are taking a fresh look at their financial models. The Conservative movement is a whether the ways its synagogues charge dues will be able to sustain the congregations in the long run. Bo will take more than money. A big part of success will depend on the strength of the synagogues' relations

"How to be fair, equitable and how to get everybody to pay is what we're all facing," Isserow says.

The Union for Reform Judaism's "[Reimagining Financial Support for your 21st Century Congregation](#)," is a generate ideas that member synagogues will test. In March, a Beth El member joined representatives of 16 nationwide in Chicago for an initial meeting.

Beth El then formed a task force to examine the congregation's fair share system and to determine how w it will examine other funding models and then recommend to the synagogue board a plan that it believes

“By the spring of 2014, a plan for implementation of some fiscal change will be prepared for launching in i Lieberman Barzilai, who oversees the national program for the Union for Reform Judaism. “This could be fundraising strategy or some other financial innovation.”

Following that, the congregations will launch pilot programs they will have devised, she says.

## Fixed dues

Unlike Beth El, many synagogues used a fixed-dues system, in which categories of members — families, si pay particular amounts. If a member can't meet the payment, the synagogue will reduce or eliminate the c

“Either you have to prove you need relief or the congregation can just give it,” Isserow says.

This system has its own downside. If a synagogue requires proof of need, that can damage its relationship risks losing crucial funds from members who might actually be able to pay.

The larger problem with fixed dues is that “anyone who comes to the congregation will think the dues are says.

**Temple Sinai** in Washington was already looking at its future when it heard about “Reimagining Financia

“The temple was doing strategic thinking about dues and how we welcome people,” says executive director Jewish world have shifted — there are diminishing affiliation rates. And there have been changes in the e

The congregation is stable, with 1,100 member households, she says. “Financially, we're OK. But we really recognize these trends.”

Like Beth El, Temple Sinai has established a dues task force. “We've been doing a modified fair share” base of income required, she says.

They're looking into not just how much people should pay, but “what might motivate people to stay longer greater financial stake.”

Since the Chicago meeting, Temple Sinai, Beth El and the other congregations have participated in a series from Chabad, whose synagogues don't charge dues, yet tend to flourish.

## On dues alone?

But the question seems not to be how can you survive without charging dues, but how can you survive on kehilla (congregation) operations and finance for United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism ~~save it can't~~

“There was a time when people were bringing in a lot of money, when mone

Even before the recession began, Jews' relationships to synagogues had loos what you do. A new generation looks at membership as more discretionary puts more onus on synagogue leadership.”

Both movements are looking at the “freewill giving model.” As Barzilai describes the approach, the synago budget is and what a member's share of the budget is and leaves it to the member to decide how much to p

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“They say, ‘X is what we need everybody to pay.’ Some pay more and some pay less,” she says.

“The freewill giving model ties in philanthropy with dues,” Mael says, “with an understanding that we hav

[Writing in eJewishPhilanthropy](#), Rabbi Dan Judson, who studies the history of synagogues and money, de: Israel of Sharon, outside of Boston, scrapped its dues and instituted the voluntary freewill system.

Membership had been dropping and dues had been rising, which led to a decrease in revenue, when the C change in 2008. The revenue decline slowed, then reversed. And membership increased, Judson writes, ad

“One of the beneficial consequences of the new system is that the synagogue no longer has to chase people pledges.”

But success isn’t automatic or destined. “Building relationships is the critical piece,” Barzilai says. “The cor relations with members.”

Synagogues will need to treat “members more as donors, as customers we need to cultivate,” Mael adds.

Then, synagogues won’t “have to prove why members should give — they’ve already done that work. For n freewill approach], the dues paid have gone up,” Barzilai says.

These are some of the options that congregations like Beth El and Temple Sinai will be considering in the in mind the basic truth that a happy congregant is often a giving congregant.

“If you do feel connected, you’ll find a way to support” your synagogue, Mael says. “People want to feel the

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