

Guidance for Congregations on Partner Status Policy and Congregational Placement

On September 21, 2015, RRC's faculty voted that having a non-Jewish partner would no longer bar qualified applicants from admission to RRC or from graduating as rabbis and simultaneously restated admissions standards to explicitly consider an applicant's commitment to Jewish continuity as expressed and reflected in their personal, familial and communal life.

This document addresses the implications of that decision upon congregational placement. Some congregations now feel strongly that they could not interview or hire a rabbi who has a non-Jewish partner. Some congregations are concerned but do not view this as the only factor in choosing their rabbi. Some congregations do not see this as a factor in hiring a rabbi.

The guidance below is meant to help congregations navigate the issue. Positions will be announced to rabbis through the same process without regard to whether the congregation has a stated position on this issue or what that position is. Rabbis decide, each in their own way, which positions to pursue based upon the placement form and other available public information including the congregation's website.

We recommend that congregations who have decided not to interview rabbis with non-Jewish partners state this explicitly on their placement form to remove any doubt of their position. For congregations willing to consider a candidate with a non-Jewish partner and interested in exploring the issue, we recommend a series of interview questions. Congregations who would welcome a rabbi with a non-Jewish partner or for whom this is a question of no concern, may but need not address the issue in their placement form.

On the placement form

We recommend congregation's state their preference in the section "Mission and Values" under the first item: What qualities are most important to you in your new rabbi?

For example: "If the rabbi has a partner, the partner must be Jewish; rabbi does not officiate at intermarriages; keeps kosher; is knowledgeable about Reconstructionism; is able to teach people of all ages; is a good listener, non-judgmental, spiritual, joyful, approachable, thoughtful and has a good sense of humor."

The placement form encourages congregations to attach documents describing congregational policy. (Rabbis read these documents, but not always before applying. Some read the documents in preparation for the first interview.) Congregations often now include a policy, if they have one, describing "The Role of Non-Jew in the Congregation" which might include statements like the following:

- All clergy, program and education staff must be Jewish, and partnered clergy must have a Jewish partner.
- Synagogue administrator must be Jewish, but support staff need not be.
- Non-Jews can be members of the congregation if their Jewish partner is a member.

At the end of the first interview

For some congregations, it may be helpful to confirm issues of great importance to the congregation at the end of the first interview. By placing this at the end of the first interview, you will already have engaged in a conversation and begun to build a relationship. Say something to the effect of, “It has been wonderful talking to you, and we appreciate your time. Before we end, we wanted to recap a couple of things from our placement form that are important to us...”

During an interview

The following questions are appropriate for both the first interview (by phone/skype) and also for the second in-person interview, and can help the search committee better understand the rabbi’s Jewish life and thinking. For experienced candidates the additional questions can provide real examples of interaction in a congregation.

- Please describe your level of Jewish observance – including Shabbat and kashrut.
- What level of observance would you be comfortable with from the congregation?
- What are your personal feelings about the role of a non-Jew in the congregation?
- What roles for non-Jews would you be comfortable with in the congregation?
- How have you encouraged non-Jews to participate in synagogue life?
- How have you worked with a family where one member belongs to a church?
- How have you worked with a family where only the Jewish partner comes to the synagogue?

Additional questions:

- Our rabbi serves as a model or exemplar of Jewish living for our community. Can you tell us how your own choices, both personal and professional, set an example that you would like congregants to see and to follow?
- All Jews today, including our members, make choices about Jewish practice. How do you think about those choices? How do you counsel people to make them in their own lives? How is this different between Jews by birth, Jews by choice, non-Jews?
- We all make choices in our lives for lots of reasons, and some of them seem surprising to us or to our friends or can be hard to explain to ourselves or to others,. Can you think of a Jewish choice you have made that might be hard to discuss with a member? How do you discuss and explain it?
- Tell us how you have worked with families where not all members are Jews or with non-Jews. What is most challenging for you in this work? What comes most easily?
- Some rabbis are comfortable with their families being visible and active in the congregation and some are not. Please discuss your feelings and approach to this.

Congregations who have additional questions or concerns should consult with Rabbi Joel Alpert at jalpert@reconplacement.org 215.576.0800 x304.

