



BRUCE NELSON

Congregants at Temple Beth Am celebrated the temple's 50th anniversary with dinner, cake and music.



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Marvin and Eileen Fishman of Henrietta, left, talk with Linda Lowenstein of Brighton.

Smaller is better at temple

50-year-old Beth Am attracts families who want to become involved

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STAFF WRITER

HENRIETTA — In the mid-1970s, Bruce Nelson and his family were ready for a new place of worship.

"We had originally been part of a large synagogue in town," recalled Nelson, 61. "We were lost in the crowd."

By moving to Temple Beth Am on East Henrietta Road, Nelson, his wife and kids found what they were looking for: a small congregation, friendly people, and a higher level of personal involvement.

"It's more participatory," said Nelson, of Henrietta. "(In) large synagogues, you don't often get an opportunity to participate in committees and things."

These days, the Nelson family is one of about 50 families at the temple. All of them seem to relish the chance to get involved.

That kind of commitment has helped Beth Am, a conservative congregation, reach its 50th anniversary this year.

The temple celebrated the occasion recently with a reception, dinner and live music.

The event "went very well," said Aaron Marsh of

Henrietta, a lay leader of the congregation. "A lot of people put in a lot of work in a short period of time ... It came together really well."

The anniversary was especially meaningful for some members who have been with Beth Am since around the time the congregation was founded in 1960.

Ruth Steinberg-Barnhart, a longtime member, said the original congregants just felt they needed different conservative services.

Over the years, Beth Am has attracted many members through its uniqueness as a conservative congregation.

It was one of the first Jewish temples in the area to embrace equality between the sexes and allow women greater roles, members say.

In the 1980s, it became one of the first conservative congregations in the country to have a female rabbi, Marsh said.

"As time has gone on, others have caught up to where we were," he said, "but it was sort of a key thing that drew attention to us during that time period."

These days, Beth Am, a comparatively small congregation, can't afford a full-time rabbi, so it shares Rabbi Geoffrey Goldberg with congregation Beth Hamedresh-Beth Israel in Rochester.

Nonetheless, many members say their small size is a

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Aaron Marsh, lay leader of Temple Beth Am, takes a look at memorabilia during the celebration. He said the temple emphasizes equal treatment for everyone, regardless of background.

Temple

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major draw.

"We're not big," said Marsh, who often leads service when Goldberg can't attend, "but we're somewhere where people can feel comfortable."

Marsh, 33, added that Beth Am can tailor services for whoever attends on a given day.

Services can have more English or more Hebrew, more traditional music or more contemporary songs, depending on who's in the audience.

The temple also emphasizes equal treatment for people regardless of their backgrounds.

"They're asked to be involved regardless of money, regardless of so-

cial status," Marsh said.

"We try to involve everybody from every age. Everybody knows everybody, everybody feels comfortable."

Goldberg said Beth Am's members have become very close over the years.

"The happy events, the sad events, they've been there for each other," he said.

"It brings back a lot of memories."

Candi Nelson, Bruce Nelson's wife, said she has enjoyed being part of Beth Am for so many years and taking part in many different temple activities.

She is one of the temple's past presidents.

"You don't join a small congregation if you don't love working," she said. □

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Barbara Freeman of Henrietta, left, talks to Sar Strassman of Henrietta.

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