

The 50th Anniversary of Temple Emanuel June 2003

by Cherry Wunderlich

The first weekend in March marked a special occasion for Temple Emanuel in Kensington – its 50th anniversary. Recently we learned more about Temple Emanuel's history from Myrna Rosen Byer, congregation president, and Cindy Gerech, board member and librarian. They also told us about its current programs and its involvement in the community.

The temple's origins go back to 1952, when 10 local families met and decided that they would like to form a Reform Judaism congregation. It would be the first in Montgomery County.

With a student rabbi, the families began holding services in meeting space provided by Kensington area churches, including Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church. The families also began a religious school for the children; it met at McKenney Hills Elementary School. In the fall of 1952, the newly forming congregation held High Holiday services with the student rabbi.

In 1953, Rabbi Leon Adler became the congregation's rabbi. He was to serve for some 35 years, until his death in 1988. Rabbi Warren Stone came later that year and has served ever since. He also currently serves as the president of the Washington Board of Rabbis. For the past two years, the congregation has also had a cantor, Rosalie Boxt.

In 1955, the congregation purchased property at 10101 Connecticut Avenue. The groundbreaking for its first building followed in 1957. The rectangular building stood where the social hall and lower-level classrooms now stand.

The congregation grew to 200 families in 1953. Today, the congregation serves more than 500 families, a diverse community in background and ages. Members range from singles and young families to seniors.

From its beginnings, the congregation has focused both on serving its families and on reaching out to the larger community. Programs and activities involve everyone from children through seniors. The religious school, with the leadership of Temple Educator Itzik Eshel, has 14 classrooms. Children stay in the school through 10th grade and then are confirmed.

Sunday morning coffeehouses offer speakers and discussions for adults while the children attend religious school. Youth groups are active in the congregation and community, with trips to New York City and other areas.

To bring individuals and families together in small groups as communities within the larger community, there are Havurot groups of seven to ten families each. Often gathering in each others' homes, they also enjoy outings and restaurant gatherings, and come together to mark life cycle events and to celebrate holidays together.

Two service organizations, the Women of Reform Judaism/Sisterhood and the Brotherhood, are also active. A retreat group has been meeting since the 1960s. Temple Emanuel also has a B'nai Mitzvah program, a two-year program for adults. Programs for seniors include exercise classes and other activities.

Large numbers of volunteers are actively involved in every facet of

congregation life, as well as the newsletter and the Website www.TempleEmanuelMD.org. Congregation members volunteer in many ways, often donating the skills of their professional services.

Over the years since its founding, the congregation has been involved in the community in several areas. Environmental awareness and action are longstanding concerns.

Now led by the Green Shalom Committee, activities range from recycling to using environmentally friendly materials, such as the bamboo floors in one of the worship spaces, to the beautiful tree sculptures in the sanctuary created by an artisan in the southwestern United States.

A recent speaker explained the history and challenges of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed, an area spanning some 64,000 square miles. The Person to Person program was another early focus.

The congregation also became an active supporter of SOME (So Others Might Eat), a DC organization that provides meals and other services to indigent people.

In several recent years, the Temple also hosted memorable benefit concerts to raise funds for SOME. SOME recently recognized the congregation's many contributions with a special award.

Service to homeless people also includes providing food and other support to a local homeless shelter. Through the Ton of Food drive, volunteers from the congregation recently collected 473 bags of food totaling 8,600 pounds for the Manna Food Center of Montgomery County.

Temple Emanuel is also actively involved in the Kensington Ministerium. This group of seven or eight Kensington churches and synagogues includes Holy Redeemer Catholic Church, the AME Church of Kengar, and other faith communities.

These congregations hold an interfaith service for Thanksgiving, hosted this past year by Temple Emanuel. Last September 11, the congregations also held a 9/11 memorial observance at the Kensington Town Hall/Community Center.

During the past year, another major project was the building renovation and expansion. Over the year of the construction, the congregation met in numerous places in the community.

Despite the many challenges, the project brought the community closer together. Services were held in the Executive Office Building cafeteria in Rockville. The Torah Study group met in Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church in Kensington. Bar Mitzvahs and Bat Mitzvahs took place in varied locations.

The religious school classes took place in space rented at Lee Middle School. The offices and administrative staff met in space opposite the Café Monet in Kensington. Many events and meetings were held in the homes of congregation members.

Now in its new space, with a spacious light-filled library serving all ages, a large sanctuary and an alternate worship space as well as a social hall, the congregation honored its 50th anniversary with three days of celebrations and observances. The weekend's events included speakers on the history of the congregation, tributes to past congregation presidents, a Torah Fair for the children, and a concert

by the singer Danny Maseng.

Special projects for 2003 continue with a silent auction benefit on June 14th. The anniversary celebration and the ongoing activities continue to reaffirm congregation's goal, expressed by congregation President Myrna Rosen Byer, of "creating an environment where people are comfortable, where everyone is accepted, and where they bring these values back to their homes."