

Membership in USCJ-Affiliated Congregations

“My house will be called a house of prayer for all people.”

—Isaiah 56:7

Introduction

In 2017, USCJ changed its congregational standards to enable affiliated communities to offer membership to people of other faith backgrounds than Jewish. Since that time, many congregations across North America have begun the important work of shifting their internal cultures to be more inclusive and to codify what that looks like by amending their constitutions regarding membership.

Recognizing the diversity of perspectives and customs across our Movement, USCJ does not mandate who can be a synagogue member nor what rights and privileges members may have in terms of voluntary service, ritual, or lifecycle participation. Rather, we support every congregation in developing its own criteria based on what is best for their community. For some communities, this criteria includes who may stand on the *bimah*, interpreting Jewish identity, and whether to include the word “interfaith”* in outward facing communications.

We do, however, encourage affiliated congregations to celebrate communal diversity by engaging all those who seek connection with authentic and dynamic Judaism. We call on our congregations to open their tent doors wider to embrace all who wish to enter as we strive to make the words of Isaiah (above) a reality in the twenty-first century. Engaging beloveds of other faith backgrounds serves dual purposes: 1) cultivates a sense of belonging; 2) optimizes everyone’s skill sets or gifts.

This resource was created to provide our stakeholders with examples and potential language that may be adopted or adapted according to the rabbi as *mara d’atra* (religious decider) along with the congregation’s board of directors, and the congregation at large. Any bylaw changes must conform to all relevant federal, state, and/or provincial legislation. We also suggest you consult your attorneys or others familiar with the bylaws and governance matters. For more information about religious services, see the [Guidelines for Ritual and Lifecycle Participation resource](#).

Two articles that might be useful for those involved to read and discuss include:

[“This Yom Kippur, she’ll pray inside the synagogue, he’ll secure it on the outside.”](#)

[“‘Are you a Jew?’ To serve on a synagogue board, increasingly the answer can be ‘no’”](#)

If you would like to have a conversation or need any support as you work on creating positive change, contact Dr. Keren R. McGinity, USCJ Interfaith Specialist, kerenmcginity@uscj.org.

* Language is imperfect; the term “interfaith” can oftentimes be a misnomer. Some couples and families self-identify as interfaith, while others prefer to be seen as Jewish or mixed heritage.

EXAMPLE 1: Simple and straightforward

(a) Membership is available to all individuals over 18 years of age who have an articulable relationship to Judaism and agree to affirm the mission and core values of the Synagogue.

(b) A membership unit may include the applicant's partner as well as dependents under the age of 24.

(c) Any member is eligible to serve in a role that is not subject to term limits and is eligible to serve on the Board of Directors.

(d) The President(s) shall be Jewish.

(e) The Vice President(s) shall be Jewish.

(f) The Ritual Committee Chair shall be Jewish.

(g) The Religious School Director shall be Jewish.

NB: There is no distinction between a Jew's and their beloved's rights in the Bylaws. Member benefits in halakhic matters remain under the purview of the Rabbi; these are not set by the Board.

EXAMPLE 2: Neither death nor divorce shall end membership

Section 1: Any person over the age of 18 who is Jewish or with a connection to the Jewish community may be approved for membership by the Board of Trustees after submission of an application.

Section 2: The Board of Trustees may approve the application for membership of any person who meets the qualifications of Section 1 and who indicates acceptance of all the provisions of this Constitution, and of any bylaws, rules and responsibilities imposed by the Board of Trustees.

Section 3: The unit of membership shall be an individual or a family. The "family" unit is understood as (a) adult married persons or other domestic partners who are economically and emotionally committed to each other; (b) adults and their dependent children; or (c) a single parent and their dependent children.

Section 4: Each adult member, up to two per family unit, shall have and be entitled to one vote on all questions before the Congregation.

Section 5: Members of other faith backgrounds shall be considered as members in good standing and are welcome to share in the communal life of the Congregation, including membership on committees. The holding of trusteeship or other elected office shall be reserved for Jewish members.

Section 6: Neither death nor divorce shall terminate the membership of the surviving or remaining individual(s), regardless of their religious status.

EXAMPLE 3: Only married partners are eligible

1. Any person over 18 years of age who subscribes to the objectives of this Congregation and is Jewish shall be eligible for membership upon written application. Such full privileges include membership for the spouse of the applicant. Spouses and family members of other faith backgrounds are encouraged to participate in religious, social, educational, and other activities of the Congregation, to the extent determined by the rabbi as *mara d'atra* and in accordance with the *halakhic* guidance of the Rabbinical Assembly's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards.

2. Each member shall have the following rights and privileges:

- (a) Vote at all meetings of the Congregation;
- (b) Serve on any committee of the Congregation as designated by the president or authorized person or body;
- (c) If Jewish, be eligible for election as a director and officer or appointment to serve on or chair committees that pertain to matters of faith;
- (d) Participate in all religious, social, educational and other activities of the Congregation;
- (e) Be eligible for membership in any Brotherhood, Sisterhood, or affiliated organization of the congregation.
- (f) Membership of a spouse of another faith will not be terminated as the result of separation, divorce from, or death of the Jewish member.

EXAMPLE 4: Five membership categories

Section A. Membership may be extended to any person of the Jewish faith (as defined by the synagogue's *mara d'atra*) and to certain persons not of the Jewish faith but eligible for membership, as described in Section B below.

Section B. There shall be five (5) types of membership:

1) Household Memberships

A Household Membership comprises two adults (either related by marriage or unrelated, at least one of whom must be Jewish) who reside in the same household or one adult, raising Jewish children. For purposes of these Bylaws, each adult who is a part of a Household Membership is considered a Household Member. A widow/widower or surviving or divorced partner of a Jewish Household Member may continue as a Household Member.

2) Individual Memberships

An Individual Membership is available to a Jewish individual eighteen (18) years of age or older, or a non-Jewish widow/widower or surviving or divorced partner of a Jewish Household Member.

3) Honorary Memberships

Honorary Memberships shall automatically be conferred upon the Congregation's clergy, the Educational Professional, and their spouses and children. Additional honorary memberships may be conferred upon other deserving Jewish adults upon two-thirds (2/3) vote of the Board of Directors present and voting. Honorary memberships will be conferred on a yearly basis.

4) Associate Memberships

Associate Memberships shall be extended on a yearly basis to either Jewish individuals or households who are regular members in Good Standing of other Jewish congregations. These members shall not be entitled to membership benefits and privileges. These members shall, however, be invited to participate in all religious services, activities, and functions. Prospective Associate Members may be required to provide written documentation of their membership in another Congregation.

5) Junior Memberships

Junior Memberships may be extended on a yearly basis to any Jewish students enrolled full-time in any middle school, high school, or college, through the age of twenty-five, who are not children of a member. These members shall not be entitled to membership benefits and privileges. These members shall, however, be invited to participate in all religious services and post *B'nai Mitzvah* religious school activities and shall be entitled to membership in United Synagogue Youth and Geshar. Prospective Junior Members may be required to provide written documentation of their full-time enrollment.