

# **Congregational Focus Groups Final Report**

## **Prepared for the**

### **Congregation Albert Rabbi Search Committee**

#### **July 26, 2020**

### **Introduction**

The Congregation Albert (CA) Rabbi Search Committee (RSC) offered nine Congregational Focus Groups' meetings between June 17 and July 8, 2020. The meetings were designed to provide CA members an opportunity to have input into the rabbi search and selection process, and were conducted via Zoom. A third-party neutral<sup>1</sup> facilitator conducted the meetings and a note taker was also present at each meeting. Seven meetings of the nine meetings were held; no participants registered for remaining two meetings.

The CA RSC developed a list of four primary questions for discussion during the all focus group meetings and provided them in advance to registered participants. These questions tiered off of an earlier online survey offered to congregants designed to identify the most important skills, knowledge, experience, abilities, personality traits and characteristics they desired in a new rabbi.

Meetings ran from 90 minutes to two hours each. Participants were candid, sincere and thoughtful in their response to the questions, and the discussion at each meeting was profound and rich as participants explored their hopes and visions for the future of CA.

Prior to ending each meeting, congregants were asked to prioritize the most important responses to each question. The facilitator and note taker also kept track throughout the meeting of ideas that were shared and concurred upon by multiple meeting participants.

This report summarizes the most important skills, knowledge, experience, abilities, personality traits and other characteristics for CA's new rabbi as identified by the participants.

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<sup>1</sup> The third party neutral facilitator was not affiliated with CA. She is a professional facilitator, and has some knowledge of the NM Jewish community at large through her service as a Board member of the New Mexico Holocaust and Intolerance Museum.

## **Question 1:**

### ***What do you value most about our congregation?***

- *What do you enjoy most?*
- *What is/are the congregation's greatest strength/s?*
- *What is unique about our congregation?*

1. **Sense of Community.** Participants felt most strongly about the sense of community at CA. They highly value gathering with like-minded people who share their cultural and spiritual beliefs and their Jewish values. Participants felt a sense of belonging at CA. Comments like, "When I walk into Temple Albert, I feel like I'm coming home," were not uncommon.
2. **Diversity.** CA members highly value the rich diversity of the congregation. This is a multi-faceted diversity that includes demographics (ages, races, cultural and educational backgrounds, gender identities, etc.), beliefs and practices (religious, spiritual, music, speaking and reading Hebrew, etc.), and lifestyles (single, partnered, married, interfaith marriage, parents, teens, seniors, etc.)
3. **Music.** Across the board, CA members highly value music. Whether it be traditional liturgy, holiday favorites, children's songs, secular favorites, etc. Music is especially valued in worship, at times of celebration, and in CA's ECC and religious school. It is worth noting here that there was a distinct preference for more traditional tunes at services, especially during the High Holy Days.
4. **Learning.** CA is a learning congregation. Members are eager to participate in learning opportunities at every level. CA's Early Childhood Center (ECC) and religious school are critical components of the congregation. Adult education opportunities, and Torah study are also well-loved. The congregation's ongoing commitment to education and learning is considered one of CA's strongest assets.
5. **Community Service.** CA's role in the community at large is broad and well-respected. The participants cited the many community service opportunities CA provides as one of the things they love best about CA. Whether they are working with immigrants and asylum seekers; marching as a congregation in the local Pride parade; providing housing, food and activities for local homeless families; or installing solar panels and low-water landscaping at the synagogue to help address climate change, CA's many community service activities are highly valued by congregants and community members alike.

## **Question 2:**

***What do you think are the congregation's biggest opportunities/primary future goals?***

- *What actions/steps does the congregation need to achieve them?*
- *What characteristics does a Rabbi need to help motivate the congregation to achieve them?*

1. **Recruit and Retain Young Members and Families.** This goal represents the number one concern of CA members at every congregational focus group meeting. Congregants recognize that without younger members and families (with or without children), CA may not survive far into the future. This is an important issue for almost all Jewish – and non-Jewish – communities of faith at this point in time.
2. **Strengthen Educational Programs.** While participants highly value CA's ECC and religious school, they believe that a culture of continual improvement and innovation in both programs is vital. CA members also want to see more adult education programs and learning opportunities that are offered with other synagogues in Albuquerque and statewide, as well as in partnership with the JCC and Albuquerque Jewish Federation. More online learning programs, and more imaginative and creative educational approaches – for example, offering courses in an outdoor "classroom" – are also seen as learning goals.
3. **Continued Community Involvement.** CA members are committed to involvement in the community at large. In addition to social action programs that offer community service and advocacy, congregants want to continue and strengthen CA's leadership in the interfaith community, explore more partnerships with other community organizations that share their values, and continue to serve as a primary community resource for elected officials, schools, and other community institutions.
4. **One Size Does Not Fit All.** Participants appreciate the fact that each person who attends CA has opportunities to worship, seek spirituality, and learn in ways that are most meaningful to them personally. Members want to support and foster spiritual and religious practices that allow everyone to find ways to connect to their Jewishness in individually satisfying ways.<sup>2</sup> This can be achieved through a variety of methods including providing traditional and non-traditional programs and services, and using technology in new and original ways. Congregants want to see CA adapt and expand their Jewish practices in a manner which demonstrates that traditional values and beliefs are compatible with the new values of our new world.
5. **Transparency.** Transparency is both a congregational goal and a characteristic desired in the new rabbi. Information should be shared openly and frequently as appropriate. This includes not only information regarding Board of Trustee activities and policies, volunteer opportunities, regular announcements of CA services and other events, but also transparency that will help prevent and address rumors and gossip. Many participants have

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<sup>2</sup> Willingness to conduct interfaith marriages is an important expectation of CA members for their new Rabbi.

commented how much they have appreciated the transparency with which the embezzlement issue has been handled.

6. **Connecting People.** CA members are looking for a rabbi who helps connect people on many different levels; a rabbi with the ability to communicate with and relate to the broad diversity of people affiliated with CA is critical. But beyond communications skills, CA's new rabbi should be someone who sees and encourages connections and combinations between individuals, families and groups. Congregants indicated they consider expanding connections a commitment to helping members:
  - feel welcomed, accepted and supported.
  - enhance their strong sense of community through camaraderie and new friendships.
  - increase collaboration and innovation through extended networks.
7. **Inspiration, Motivation, Innovation and Participation.** Focus group participants expressed their strong belief that the new CA Rabbi must be able to inspire, motivate, innovate and participate to be effective in helping the congregation achieve their goals. Congregants want someone energetic, enthusiastic, active in Temple and community groups and events, an inspirational worship leader and spiritual guide, an educator that can motivate learners (especially one that can develop a strong connection to children and youth).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The CA RSC continues aim at managing expectations by reminding congregants that no one person will be highly skilled at everything, and that the new rabbi will have strengths and weaknesses, just as we all do.

### **Question 3:**

#### ***What qualities do you appreciate in a Rabbi?***

- *How can a Rabbi improve your/your family's connection to Judaism and the congregation?*
- *What Rabbinic roles do you feel are most important to you, you family, our congregation, and community?*
- *What personal characteristics are important to you in a Rabbi?*
- *What type of experience or special interest/skills would you like to see in a Rabbi?*
- *How would you like for the Rabbi to engage with this group or committee?*

1. **Inspiring Educator.** As a congregation of life-long learners, CA members want a rabbi who can instruct and coach in a broad spectrum of subject matters: historical, rabbinical, spiritual, Jewish wisdom, practice, tradition, culture and values, etc. The congregation is looking for a rabbi with the ability to teach to all different age groups (preschool through adulthood) and Jewish experience, for example devout and knowledgeable Jews, members with limited Jewish education or experience, Jews by choice, "cultural" Jews, and non-Jews – both those who are part of Jewish interfaith couples and non-Jews from the community at large .
2. **Approachable.** Focus group participants expressed their desire for a rabbi that was approachable and interpersonally interactive with all members of the congregation and their families. The new rabbi should know congregants and their children by name and greet them when they see them. CA's new rabbi should enjoy and engage in conversation, (especially before and after services and at congregational events), have an open door policy, and make people feel seen and welcomed at CA.
3. **Communication skills.** It is imperative that the new rabbi have strong communications skills and is comfortable interacting with people of all ages – from children to the elderly. S/he should be a good and patient listener; have some counseling and referral skills; communicate easily and effectively with kids and teens; be fair and open-minded; and communicate in a way that makes everyone feel they are important.
4. **Religious and Spiritual Leader.** CA members turn to their rabbi to provide both religious and spiritual leadership, and to understand the difference between the two. Participants indicated they are looking for a rabbi who loves Judaism, a rabbi who loves God and comprehends the many different concepts of a divine creative force, and a rabbi who loves and appreciates the role of music in worship and spiritual practice. They want a rabbi with demonstrated experience in "doing Jewish" in many different ways – a rabbi who provides leadership in prayer, devotion and all other manner of activities that help them connect and unify with God.
5. **Leader in the Jewish Community and the Larger Community.** The new rabbi should be comfortable serving in a leadership role beyond CA. S/he will be called upon by the interfaith community, elected officials, other organizations and institutions, the media, etc. to serve as a spokesperson and

representative for Jewish doctrine, thought, values, opinion, education and social action. CA members think it is important to have a rabbi that is both comfortable and effective in that kind of leadership role.

6. **Important Personality/Attitude Characteristics.** In all of the CA congregational focus group meetings, a variety of personality traits and general attitudes were identified as extremely important in a new rabbi. Those most frequently identified were: optimism and a positive attitude, enthusiasm and excitement about Judaism and the future, a good sense of humor, and creativity and willingness to innovate.
7. **Core Jewish Traits:** CA members value highly the core Jewish traits of honesty, integrity, empathy, fairness, humility, compassion, open-mindedness, understanding, non-judgement, and kindness above all. Congregants believe the new rabbi should demonstrate those qualities.

Question 4:

***What features do you feel are special or unique about Congregation Albert, Albuquerque and New Mexico that would help recruit a prospective Rabbi?***

1. **The Land of Enchantment.** New Mexico is truly unique among the 50 states, and offers distinct advantages to those who are lucky enough to live here, including:
  - *Singular beauty.* Breathtaking landscapes and natural and cultural features found nowhere else.
  - *Outstanding weather.* The sun shines almost every day of the year.
  - Exceptional outdoor opportunities. Albuquerque alone features some of the most superlative hiking, biking, skiing, fishing, lake boating, camping, rock and mountain climbing, parks and green spaces, nature trails, National Forests and National Wildlife Refuges, and other outdoor features to be found anywhere in the USA. Within an hour or two drive one can also raft of world-class white water rapids, relax in natural hot springs, and visit archeological, paleontological and historic sites.
  - *Extraordinary cultural diversity.* With 21 Pueblo Nations, as well as the Navajo Nation and two Apache Tribes, the Native American influence and population of New Mexico is part of the state's remarkable heritage and shapes the state's character. Add to that the strong influence of the Spanish and Mexican colonial period, the impact of early homesteaders and fur-trappers, and you begin to get an idea of the one-of-a-kind culture. And, it must be noted that, since food is part of culture, New Mexico boasts some of the most world's most renowned local foods and restaurants.
  - *Delightful people.* Deeply tied to the land and to spirit, artistic, innovative, scientific, quirky, multi-lingual – so many words and phrases can be used to describe the people of New Mexico, but the most frequently used are kind and friendly.
  - *Extraordinary Jewish history.* The majority of "conversos" or "crypto Jews" in the United States ended up living in New Mexico. These families escaped the Spanish Inquisition by feigning conversion to Catholicism, but secretly continued to practice Jewish traditions in their homes for many years and evidence of their precarious lives is still found in New Mexico. Jewish migrants from Mexico and states east of the Mississippi River settled in New Mexico centuries ago. Some of their descendants are members of Congregation Albert.
  - *Cost of living.* The cost of living is relatively low in Albuquerque in comparison to other cities and metropolitan areas of its size, including housing, transportation and other regular living expenses. You get a bigger "bang for the buck" in Albuquerque than in many other large and growing urban areas.

2. **Congregation Albert is special.** CA members consider themselves exceptionally warm and welcoming.<sup>4</sup> Members celebrate their diversity, are willing to try new things and innovate, love learning, have strong Jewish values, and are very social action oriented. They have a deep sense of community, and a sincere desire to grow the congregation by reaching out to under-represented and unaffiliated groups. CA is a Rabbi-centric congregation, that is they highly value their Rabbi and want her/him to be successful.
3. **Opportunity for significant Influence.** CA is the largest and most recognized Jewish congregation in New Mexico. As such, the CA Rabbi is well known both in the local and statewide Jewish community, as well important segments of the larger New Mexico community. In essence, the CA Rabbi and can be characterized as “New Mexico’s Rabbi.” As noted in Question 3 above, s/he is considered a leader in the community at large and is often called upon by the interfaith community, elected officials, other organizations and institutions, the media, etc. to serve as a spokesperson and representative for Jewish thought, opinion, education and social action. The CA Rabbi is frequently asked to sit on boards; participate in state, local and tribal government activities, educational programs, etc.; provide media interviews; support and host interfaith events; and support community-wide social action initiatives. The CA Rabbi has a tremendous opportunity to influence progress in New Mexico’s Jewish community and community at large, especially in the areas of social action, tolerance and interfaith relations.

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<sup>4</sup> This perception has been corroborated in CA RSC interviews with former Rabbis, as well as with members of both the Jewish community and the community at large that regularly interact with CA



## **Conclusion**

The Congregational Focus Groups were one of a number of opportunities and methodologies used by the CA RSC to collect input from CA members and important external stakeholders to help define the needs and desires of CA members as they transition to a new rabbi next July. Participants in these focus groups provided a wealth of thoughtful, insightful and useful information which will help the CA RSC move forward with a rabbi search process that ends with the RSC finding a rabbi who is the best possible fit for CA.

It is important to note that the results reflected in this report were not determined by the number of participants in any focus group, but solely on which ideas and responses to the four questions were most frequently shared, concurred upon, and identified as priorities by participants across all of the Congregational Focus Group meetings. The concepts and comments in this report consistently came up in every one of the Congregational Focus Groups, and were identified as priorities across the board.

It is certainly interesting that those CA members that attended the Congregational Focus Groups had such similar thoughts, desires and priorities in terms of their vision for CA's future and the rabbi they believe the congregation will need to lead them there. This uniformity in the input provided across all groups supports the validity of the findings reported here.

Many ideas and wishes regarding the skills, knowledge, experience, abilities, personality traits and other characteristics for CA's new rabbi were identified by focus group participants. While all input from every participant was heard and considered important, the CA RSC cannot recruit a new rabbi based on every single idea that was shared during these meetings.

### **A note from the authors**

Designing, organizing, convening, conducting, analyzing and reporting the results of the CA RSC Congregational Focus Groups' meetings required a considerable amount of work and dedication. The overwhelmingly positive feedback from participants, however, made the work worthwhile. We were honored to have the opportunity to witness how earnestly and authentically congregants shared their thoughts and visions for CA's next rabbi; it was a profound and enlightening experience for us. And we are grateful to have had the chance to be part of this process and to have shared these inspiring meetings with the participants.

Jennifer Cornish, Professional Facilitator  
Charna Lefton, CA RSC Co-Chair and Note Taker