

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MONMOUTH REFORM TEMPLE

Contributed and Updated by: Rabbi Sally J. Priesand – November, 2014

In early 1959, about 29 families discussed forming the first Reform Jewish congregation to serve the area around Red Bank, New Jersey. In June of that year, 50 families attended a dinner celebrating the founding of Monmouth Reform Temple.

From 1959 to 1961 Rabbi Henry Bamberger, who was then a student at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, served as student rabbi at Monmouth Reform Temple. Rabbi Richard Steinbrink then joined us as our first full-time spiritual leader, until 1966. During the early years, prior to the building of our synagogue, our congregation worshiped and educated its children at the Presbyterian Church at Shrewsbury. The ties that developed between the two congregations are renewed each year in a joint Thanksgiving Eve Service, during which the generosity of the Church to the Temple is recognized.

Rabbi Edward Ellenbogen, who served Monmouth Reform Temple from 1966 until his retirement in 1970 was followed by Rabbi Harry Scherer who served a brief term as part-time rabbi. Rabbi Alton M. Winters began ten years of service in 1971, during which he established a strong tradition of adult education. In addition, he designed the stained glass windows in the sanctuary. Also, by the early 1970's, the Religious School had evolved from a group of lay teachers into a school with a professional faculty headed by a principal.

Rabbi Sally J. Priesand, who was ordained as America's first female rabbi in 1972, became spiritual leader of our temple in 1981. Worship services began to evolve; there was significantly more congregational participation, more Hebrew was used, the Torah was read weekly, and additional services were held for festivals and special days in the Jewish calendar. Rabbi Priesand encouraged temple members to take responsibility for their own Jewish lives, to create positive Jewish memories for all our children and grandchildren, and to remember that we are all members of one temple family.

Under Rabbi Priesand's leadership, MRT became more deeply involved in the Union for Reform Judaism (formerly the Union of American Hebrew Congregations), the local Jewish Federation, and the larger community of which we are a part. As a result, social action became an important part of our temple program, and MRT received numerous awards for its commitment to the task of tikkun olam (repairing the world).

In 2006, after 25 years of service, Rabbi Priesand retired, becoming Rabbi Emerita. Rabbi Jonathan Roos was elected rabbi of the congregation. He brought to MRT his knowledge and expertise as a teacher, his commitment to tzedakah and his desire to share cutting-edge programs with the congregation. In 2010, Rabbi Michelle Pearlman became MRT's rabbi. She enriched our temple through her pastoral work, her commitment to the Tuesday morning study group and her leadership during the challenges of Hurricane Sandy. In 2013, Rabbi Robert Ourach joined our temple family as Interim Rabbi. He provided a calming presence as we re-evaluated our goals and planned for the future through the work of the Atid committee.

Atid followed in the footsteps of previous Long Range Planning Committees appointed every few years. Based upon the work of such committees, and with input from all our member families, a vision for the future was created. In 1967, the congregation built its current building in what is now Tinton Falls (formerly New Shrewsbury). The education wing of the building was expanded in 1977, and the sanctuary and social hall were enlarged in 1987. In 1997, the temple embarked on another building expansion to accommodate our growing needs for the religious school, office space and meeting rooms for our very active committees and programs. In 2013, the Atid committee created a new mission statement for MRT and provided important insights to the pulpit committee for choosing a new rabbi.

In July of 2014, Rabbi Marc A. Kline became MRT's spiritual leader. His emphasis has been on learning to listen and take care of each other, on the importance of intentionality and how strengthening interfaith relationships in our community can enrich all of us. He is devoted to the work of tikkun olam and has encouraged all of us to remember and give thanks for the many blessings we so often take for granted.

Throughout the years, temple activities were supported by two programs that deserve special mention: the Monmouth Festival of the Arts and the Tinton Falls Cooperative Nursery School. The festival was a monumental five-day undertaking that was made successful by the work of dedicated volunteers all year long. For more than four decades, it served as a unique cultural event for our community. The nursery school welcomed students of all backgrounds. In 2013, both activities came to an end as the temple decided to go in a different direction. Currently, the YMCA nursery school meets in our building.

MRT welcomes and encourages participation by all those who worship with us. Music enhances the joy of our service and adds another dimension to our sense of spirituality. Over the years, our musical leadership has evolved: going from a non-Jewish soloist to student cantors to fully invested cantors. We consider ourselves fortunate to have as part of our clergy team Cantor Gabrielle Clissold who joined our temple family in 2001. Her knowledge of Jewish music, her love for the Jewish people, her commitment to MRT and her incredible voice have enriched MRT in untold ways.

In the 55 years of its existence, Monmouth Reform Temple's success has depended upon the willingness of its members to attend services and programs, to volunteer for specific projects, to join committees and to share their unique talents and skills with our temple family. Each member is a piece of priceless mosaic in the overall design of the congregation. Each member has gifts that no one else can bring. Each member can enrich the lives of other members by being present when help is needed. Ultimately, we are partners in moving the temple forward, and what we do, or fail to do, does make a difference. Together, we take pride in our past, even as we pledge to work together to build an even greater future.