

KINDRED *Spirits*

Members of a Bethesda church and synagogue talk respectfully and openly—and share the same worship space

By Ira Apfel • Photos by Hilary Schwab

Bob Taylor of Rockville is a lifelong member of the Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church in Bethesda. Bob's mother, Nancy, has been a member of the church for nearly half a century and sings in the choir.

Bob's wife, Phyllis Taylor, belongs to Bethesda Jewish Congregation (BJC). Bob and Phyllis' two daughters, Jamie, 21, and LeAnne, 15, were bat mitzvahed at BJC.

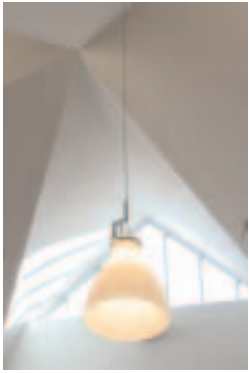
In one sense, the Taylors are not unique. Split-faith families are common in the Bethesda-area. But in another sense, they are. That's because the family members all worship in the same place.

Since 1967, Bradley Hills Presbyterian and the BJC have shared space. For the first 34 years, the BJC rented space from the church. But in 2001, the two congregations jointly paid for a building addition. Bradley Hills Presbyterian now has a 600-seat chapel next to BJC's 150-seat Covenant Hall, built in the shape of a six-pointed Jewish star (BJC uses the chapel on Jewish High Holidays). "We beat the edifice complex," says Sunny Schnitzer, hazzan—or religious leader—of BJC. "It's about the people that inhabit the space, not the space itself."

A few churches and synagogues in the U.S. own and operate worship space together, but none has done so for as long as Bradley Hills Presbyterian and BJC. And the relationship between the Bethesda congregations transcends real estate. In 2003 they even wrote and signed a covenant celebrating their relationship: "Taking to heart the biblical charge to be a light to the nations, we seek to offer a prophetic vision of interfaith partnership in a pluralistic world," it says, in part.

Their spiritual leaders regularly address their counterpart's congregation and they hold a joint service every Thanksgiving. Rev. Susan Andrews, who left Bradley Hills Presbyterian last August to become executive presbyter of Hudson River Presbytery in New York, calls the Thanksgiving service, in which she and Schnitzer would hold a dialogue on a religious topic, the high point of the year. "We pack the place with Jewish and Christian families and the services intentionally use common-denominator language," she says.

Several years ago, Andrews offered to hold more interfaith dialogues with BJC and the relationship blos-



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Phyllis and Robert Taylor of Rockville belong to Bethesda Jewish Congregation and also attend services at Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church.

Inset right: Hazzan Sunny Schnitzer of BJC and Jonathan Smoot, interim pastor at Bradley Hills Presbyterian stand in the sanctuary used by both congregations.



somed. Each dialogue helped the congregation learn about the other’s religion while deepening their own faith. A dialogue about the religious concept of suffering, for example, elicited radically different interpretations from Andrews and Schnitzer. “Christians understand that through Jesus suffering is redeemed and many of our Jewish friends do not see suffering as redemptive at all in light of the Holocaust,” she says. “These dialogues enriched our understanding of our own traditions, and people get so excited about it and want more.” BJC and Bradley Hills Presbyterian also conduct joint community service activities, such as working for Habitat for Humanity and for environmental causes.

Interim Pastor Jon Smoot knew about the relationship between BJC and BHPC when he took over from Andrews last September. The relationship was well known throughout the Presbyterian USA world and he was eager to see the congregations work up close. “I appreciate Hazzan Sunny so much. Everybody gets along so well and sharing the sacred space is very special.”

David Weiss, president of the BJC board of directors, says the relationship works on a spiritual and economical level. “We learn things that other synagogues don’t hear,” says the Bethesda resident. Weiss also counts the Thanksgiving interfaith service as a spiritual high point. “It’s a reaffirmation of our commonalities,” he says. “We’ve set a precedent for other congregations to engage in interfaith dialogue.”

A Thanksgiving Service to be Remembered

Last year's Thanksgiving service was unique even by BJC/ Bradley Hills Presbyterian standards.

For the first time the two congregations shared the pulpit with a local mosque, the Jaferia Islamic Center of Burtonsville. More than 300 people attended the special service, which drew from all three religions' liturgies (although the service was ostensibly a Shabbat service—another Thanksgiving first for the two congregations). Smoot, Schnitzer and Imam Sayed Naqvi gave their respective religion's perspective on the Torah portion of the week, which was about the rec-

onciliation of the children of Abraham. Bradley Hills Presbyterian and BJC choirs combined to sing hymns; there was even a children's service for BPHC and BJC children. A brunch "tri-ologue" followed.

"It was quite moving for everyone to witness the procession of the three sacred scriptures around the sanctuary," says Smoot. "I've read the Koran. What was new for me was the chance to hear the liturgy come to life and see how the theological strains got played out in worship. We share Abraham, but we really all go back to Adam and everybody is descended from a common creator."

The respectful atmosphere helped Bradley Hills and BJC survive a tense period in 2004 when Presbyterian Church USA voted to divest from companies that did business with Israel. Leaders of the two congregations met and hammered out a joint statement calling on Presbyterian Church USA to invest in companies that work for peaceful solutions between Israel and Palestine, which Presbyterian Church USA eventually adopted. "We care about each other so much that we're going to work this out...as long as it takes," says Andrews.

Virtually every encounter between Bradley Hills and BJC is a teachable moment. Once Andrews removed BJC's Torah from its ark—the Torah's symbolic container—and showed it to a visitor. Schnitzer later told his counterpart in no uncertain terms that touching the Torah by a gentile is highly offensive.

Even paying for the addition required compromise; Christians pledge money to their religion and Jews do not. They eventually worked out a payment formula where the building belongs to Bradley Hills Presbyterian and BJC pays a percentage of the mortgage.

Through major policy disagreements and minor faux pas, Bradley Hills and BJC work to stay together. "Some Orthodox Jews won't visit because we're located in a church, but some people think we're the future, a model of interfaith cooperation," says Schnitzer. Andrews says she has been profoundly enriched by the congregations' relationship. "I am a better Christian because I understand Judaism and I understand the rich traditions of the Jewish faith," she says. ■

Writer Ira Apfel lives in Bethesda.