

Temple Sinai Opens a Haven for Job-Seeking Members

by Abby Cohn

When he was looking for a place to start a job-networking group, Jeff Gordon turned to his house of worship: Oakland's Temple Sinai.

This seemed like an extension of community supporting community," said Gordon, who immediately expanded that base by contacting nearby Temple Beth Abraham.

Launched in May, the Temple Sinai/Beth Abraham Professional Networking Group regularly draws 20 to 40 job seekers to twice-monthly meetings. It also is developing links with two synagogue-based groups in the South Bay and with Jewish Vocational Service in San Francisco.

"I think it's important that we view this as a partnership -- take advantage of resources and expertise," said Gordon, a 46-year-old sales and marketing consultant looking for full-time work.

The Sinai/Beth Abraham group shares e-mail information with the networking groups operated out of Palo Alto's Congregation Kol Emeth and Los Altos Hills' Congregation Beth Am and has tapped into the resources of JVS. Participants regularly hear presentations by job coaches and other experts, some of whom are fellow congregants.

"There's a need," said Gordon, who estimates that more than 20 families in his 900-member synagogue are facing unemployment. Some have never experienced joblessness before.

"This is an opportunity to match need," said Gordon, with what he describes as a natural "channel for leads and referrals" from other congregants.

Rabbi Steven Chester considers his synagogue a "very appropriate place" to house the group. "A synagogue is going to be an integral part of people's lives at different stages of their life," he said. "At difficult times like this, it can be a help."

The synagogue-based networks "can be really effective," agrees Abby Snay, executive director of JVS, which has given two skills' workshops to the East Bay group.

"Part of the challenge people face when they've lost their jobs is a sense of isolation and the need to do networking," she said. Job seekers' groups based at congregations "can be very powerful."

Sinai member Dave Liebreich of Oakland can attest to that strength. After being laid off in April, Liebreich applied for a job as a software test group manager at a firm where another network member mentioned that she had

a contact.

Liebreich asked if he could use the member's name when he called that contact. "He looked at my résumé and it was a good fit," said Liebreich, who ultimately got the job.

"The hiring manager said that had I not produced some sort of networking connection that he would not have called me back." During his job search, he also joined another networking group, participated in online discussion forums and contacted numerous friends and relatives.

In the end, it was his involvement with the synagogue group that helped him land his job. "It's really the culture of helping," said Liebreich, who joined Sinai in 1992.

In addition, "you're getting a different slice of the population," he said. "You're likely to make contacts in areas you would not normally encounter outside."

Gordon acknowledges that success stories like Liebreich's are, so far, more the exception than the rule.

"Most people are still looking," he said. "That's the reality of the situation."

He has been impressed by the caliber of the group's members. "If there was a way we could create a business with people in the room, we'd have a pretty good business with all the talents and skills."

Snay said "the Jewish community is not immune" to layoffs and downsizing. With its wide ripple effects, the sour economy is striking "members of the Jewish community not touched [previously] by unemployment."

Statewide, unemployment stood at 6.3 percent in August. The figure was 6.3 percent in Alameda County, 6.8 in San Francisco and a whopping 7.6 percent in Santa Clara County.

Snay applauded the local grassroots efforts at synagogues and encouraged the establishment of ties to professional agencies like JVS. -

"We think it's really an ideal partnership," she said.

Joel Garfinkle, an Oakland job-search coach whose family has belonged to Sinai for more than 50 years, gave a presentation in July to the Sinai/Beth Abraham group. He described networking as "the lifeblood of a job search."

Recently, two longtime career centers in the Bay Area have folded, creating a gap in support services, Garfinkle said.

By setting up a support group at a synagogue, "you have a community that

already has a connection with each other," he said. "They're Jewish, they're from the Jewish community and they want to help each other find a job."