



World Union for Progressive Judaism EUROPEAN REGION

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GUIDELINES FOR CONGREGATIONS

These Guidelines are not a rigid code to be applied in all cases, but a list of issues which are likely to arise and which it would be helpful for the promoters of a new congregation to consider, especially if they are seeking financial support from the European Region.

New congregations vary very much in character; some are led by members who are familiar with Jewish communal life, while others may have few such members, and therefore will particularly benefit from the experience of others, in order to avoid some of the problems which regularly arise.

Some of the issues in the Guidelines may be too formal for a new congregation, and will only become relevant as the congregation grows, but the promoters should bear these issues in mind so that they are considered as the need arises.

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I. ORGANISATION

1.1 CONSTITUTION

The way in which the congregation is established, and the governing constitution or rules, should comply with local requirements, particularly in order to obtain any tax benefits or grants for religious bodies, and to obtain recognition by municipal or communal bodies. The congregation should also subscribe to the basic principles and practices of Progressive Judaism.

The constitution should cover the matters in the following paragraphs:

1.1.1 **Council or Board**

The **Council** should consist of lay members (members who would be considered full members by the European *Beit Din*) and its membership should be elected by all members. The number of Council members will depend on the needs of the particular congregation. There should be enough to ensure a range of opinions and experience, but not so many that meetings are difficult. There should be a procedure for Council members to retire in rotation after a certain period, whilst ensuring that there is continuity from one year to the next. The Council should meet regularly, perhaps monthly. The Rabbi is usually invited to attend all Council meetings, but not to vote. Other special groups may be permitted to be represented without a vote. The Council usually has power to appoint additional members to fill any vacant positions until the next election.

1.1.2 **Authority of the Council**

(i) The Council will fix and review subscriptions, including reduced subscriptions for special classes (young, old, unemployed). Some congregations allow elderly members to pay reduced subscriptions on the basis that any shortfall may be recovered from the estate after the death of the member and his/her spouse. The Council may terminate membership if subscriptions remain unpaid for a specified period.

(ii) The Council will employ any paid staff and obtain and maintain any premises.

(iii) All assets will be held by the Council (perhaps held by Trustees or nominees on behalf of the Council so that there is no need to transfer assets when Council members change).

(iv) The Council will have power to determine issues relating to the congregation, but religious issues are usually to be determined by the Rabbi in consultation with the Council. It should be agreed how Jewish status will be determined for membership purposes.

(v) Some congregations allow non-Jewish partners of members to be recognised as some form of Associate, with reduced membership rights.

(vi) Often each member of the Council will have a particular responsibility (such as arrangements for services, arranging of functions and cultural activities, education, administration of premises). That member will then report on that area at each meeting, or on a regular basis, but this does not restrict the responsibility of all members of the Council for all its activities.

(vii) There are usually several Officers, including Chairman, Honorary Secretary and Treasurer. These are usually appointed by the Council, but may be appointed by all the members at the election. The regulations should make it clear what decisions the Officers may take on their own without reference to the Council (eg expenditure up to a certain low level) but they should report on these matters to the Council regularly. Usually the Officers are not authorised to acquire premises, employ staff or take on borrowings without authority from the full Council. Sometimes there is an Executive consisting of the Officers and perhaps some other Council members, who are authorised to take certain decisions without involving the full Council.

(viii) There should be a procedure for payment from the Synagogue bank account, perhaps with one or two Officers authorised to make payments up to a specified level.

(ix) Often there are sub-committees for particular functions, where the chairman of the sub-committee would be a Council member; this is a useful way to involve more members of the congregation, and to give them experience in running Synagogue affairs.

1.1.3 Annual General Meeting

The AGM will receive and approve the annual accounts and deal with the election of Council members. It is important to involve as many members as possible, and often there are additional activities or discussions at the AGM to encourage maximum participation. The formal business should be dealt with promptly in order to leave time for general discussion. The constitution will provide for voting on resolutions (including the election of Council members and any resolutions submitted by members). Sometimes members whose subscriptions have not been paid for a certain period are not entitled to vote. The constitution should provide for additional General Meetings whether called by the Council or by a stated number of members. It should also provide the procedure for amending the constitution.

1.1.4 Accounts

Annual accounts should disclose all income and expenditure, and all assets and liabilities. The accounts are usually prepared by the Treasurer, independently audited and then presented to the AGM. The Treasurer will manage all funds of the congregation, and should prepare an annual Budget to be approved by the Council.

The constitution should provide procedures for approving all payments, both those within the Budget and any outside the Budget. If any funds are held by subsidiary bodies (such as a sub-committee) there should be arrangements for these funds to be accounted for and included in the annual accounts. It is good practice for monthly accounts to be completed by the second week of the next month, and for the annual accounts to be completed by the start of the second month in each year.

1.2 PREMISES

If the congregation uses premises, even on a part-time or shared basis, there should be a letter or contract, complying with the local regulations, setting out the relevant terms (including length of arrangement, rent, notice period, responsibilities for maintenance and insurance, restrictions on use).

1.3 STAFF

If any staff are employed, whether full or part time, there should be a written contract or written particulars setting out the terms (including duties, salary, notice period, holidays, and other benefits and provision for termination by either party). The document should comply with all local laws and regulations, including taxation and social security. Even if staff are voluntary and unpaid, it may be useful to have a letter setting out such matters as the authority of the person to act on behalf of the Synagogue, and the Council member to whom the person is responsible and with whom any problems should be discussed.

2. RABBI

2.1 CONTRACT

There should be a letter or contract setting out the terms of the engagement. Whether the Rabbi is an employee or an independent professional engaged by the congregation, the terms will be governed by the local law, as well as being affected by special circumstances arising from the relation between the Rabbi and the congregation.

Specify that the Rabbi is responsible for all religious issues, but in some areas in consultation with the Council, or the Chairman of the Council. In any event, there should be regular liaison between the Rabbi and the Council to maintain good working relations. Regular communication may help to sort out problems before they become too serious; in particular, the Rabbi should meet regularly with the Chairman. If there is a problem, it should be discussed openly, either between the Rabbi and the Council, or the Rabbi and the Chairman, or involving the Mentor Rabbi (see (d) below). Most congregations have a Religious Committee of lay members to discuss practices and to help the Rabbi in certain areas.

The following areas should be considered, even if they are not all included in the contract:

- (a) Salary, Salary review, expenses, benefits (including free day, holiday, time for study and professional development, pension, sickness provision and sabbatical leave)
- (b) Period of engagement, provision for termination by either party including the notice period; dismissal without notice in event of serious breaches.
- (c) Provide for regular review of the terms of the contract as circumstances change; perhaps review every three years.
- (d) Management process: procedure for dealing with complaints and disputes, and mediation procedure. A newly appointed Rabbi may have an arrangement with a mentor Rabbi, a more experienced Rabbi in another community, with whom problems can be discussed.
- (e) If the Rabbi is shared or working part-time, when will he/she be expected to be available?

2.2 DUTIES

While it is impossible to set out everything which is expected, future difficulties can be avoided if both the Rabbi and the Council attempt to work out what they expect from the Rabbi.

- (i) Services (but with help from lay members)
- (ii) Education: Teaching at Religion School (and perhaps administering the School); adult education; individual *bar/bat mitzvah* tuition; maintaining standards of *bar/bat mitzvah* pupils; proselyte tuition
- (iii) Youth work
- (iv) Life cycle events, including baby blessing, brit milah, marriage, funerals, home prayers, tombstone consecrations. Conversions should be carried out in accordance with the procedures of the European *Beit Din* or some other recognised Progressive body.
- (v) Pastoral work including sick and bereaved; there may be a lay Care Committee to help with this work
- (vi) Participation in communal affairs; representing the congregation in the wider Jewish and non-Jewish communities; recruiting new members; involvement with Israel, with the European Region and the World Union.

2.3 **APPOINTMENT PROCESS**

The appointment of the Rabbi may be best handled by a specially appointed sub-committee of the Council, consulting regularly with the full Council and with other lay members, to identify what type of Rabbi is required and to deal with issues in the transition period (including the departure of the old Rabbi and the introduction of the new one). The sub-committee should prepare a detailed specification, setting out what they are looking for, and then arrange the interview procedure. It may be useful to visit other congregations, not to head hunt the Rabbi but to see how other Rabbis operate. If the Council is not experienced in appointing a Rabbi, it may be helpful to involve an independent outsider to assist them.

3. **DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONGREGATION**

3.1 **PUBLICITY**

There should be a complete list of members, which should not be available to third parties without the consent of members.

There should be a regular newsletter to inform members and to encourage new members; this should not be restricted to e-mail, so as not to exclude members who do not use e-mail. The editor of the newsletter should be responsible to Council, and there should be a procedure to ensure that its contents are in accordance with Council policy. Letters and contributions from members should be encouraged.

There should be a member of Council responsible for the newsletter, and one responsible for ensuring regular publicity and press coverage of activities. It is important to build relations with local press so that a consistent picture is given.

Congregations often have a membership sub-committee which will seek out and interview new members. There should be an application form which can be used to keep information which may later be very useful (eg. special skills of the member, ages of children so that parents can be contacted later for religion school etc). There should be arrangements for keeping this information up to date.

There should also be an active programme to recruit new members.

3.2 **FORWARD PLANNING**

It is useful to set out a forward plan, identifying the aims and expectations in the short and medium term (for example, that within a year the congregation aims to establish a religion school, or to expand the membership by a given percentage).

Such a plan should be regularly reviewed by the Council, and will be very helpful in applying for assistance from the European Region.

Any comments or queries on these Guidelines may be addressed to the Honorary Secretary of the European Region.