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Beth Adam has made its own way

Faith matters

BY KAREN VANCE | ENQUIRER CONTRIBUTOR

SYMMES TOWNSHIP - Twenty-five years ago, a handful of people watched as Robert Barr was ordained a rabbi. They were his congregation.

Today, Congregation Beth Adam is made up of 340 adults and 110 children in its religious school, and its unique voice of Humanistic Judaism - which describes itself as a "non-theistic" celebration of Jewish culture and identity - is heard around the country.

The independent synagogue in Symmes Township has been celebrating its 25th anniversary all year, and this weekend will celebrate Barr's tenure and role as founding rabbi.

"They (the first members) were willing and they were committed. I was willing, and we did it," Barr remembers of his decision to take the post with the start-up congregation. "It was an uphill battle to start a new congregation with a new idea. People thought I was absolutely out of my mind."

But it's the idea of Humanistic Judaism that has drawn people, said Sheryl Cohen, president of the congregation.

"Beth Adam speaks with a different voice. It's inspired by tradition, but it's not imprisoned by it," Cohen said.

"It speaks to my values. We talk about big issues and wrestle with the big questions."

That's caught the attention of Jews and people of other faiths around the country. In recent years, the congregation has been selling its modern liturgies, written by congregation members.

Its Haggadah, a reader for Passover Seder meals, was sold through Barnes & Noble and Amazon.com nationally. The congregation has plans to release a book of home services, such as Hanukkah and Havdalah, the home ritual on the Sabbath.

"We're not just growing regionally, but really becoming a leader in contemporary Jewish thought," said Jill McBride, a spokeswoman for the congregation.

Barr said the congregation is successful because of its people-oriented approach and its willingness to embrace modernity and science and tackle tough modern issues like the role of religion in society and politics.

"The success of Beth Adam confirms that people were looking for what we had to offer," he said.

For more information about Beth Adam, visit www.bethadam.org or call (513) 985-0400.

STUDENTS LEARN MARKETING FROM CHURCHES

Students in Xavier University's "Marketing/Evangelizing Churches" class completed their finals this week with presentations about the region's megachurches - the Vineyard in Springdale, Crossroads Community Church in Hyde Park, and Solid Rock Church in Franklin - and two large Catholic churches - Good Shepherd in Kenwood and St. John the Evangelist in West Chester.

The first-time class, taught by adjunct professor Ted Bergh, explored marketing techniques used by today's churches.

"It was a great opportunity for the students to see marketing in the real world and in a non-business setting," said Bergh, who is also the assistant general manager of Metro.

CHURCH HOSTS KATRINA BENEFIT DANCE

St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church in Sharonville is hosting a Mardi Gras dance May 13 to benefit St. Gabriel the Archangel Catholic Church in the Gentilly neighborhood of New Orleans.

The Sharonville church, which is sending more than 80 people to New Orleans to help in June, has twinned with the parish to provide funds needed to rebuild. It was destroyed by flooding after Hurricane Katrina.

The dance, from 7 to 11 p.m., will be at the Evendale Community Center with dance contests, Mardi Gras costume contests, trivia, prizes and raffles.

The cost is \$15 in advance and \$20 at the door and includes beer, wine, soft drinks and door prizes.

For reservations, call Mary Jo Dyer at (513) 563-1433.

Ursuline Academy, 5535 Pfeiffer Road, Blue Ash, will also host a benefit for St. Gabriel. On Friday from 7 to 9 p.m., Christian rock band Last Day will perform a concert. Suggested donation is \$5 at the door.

SHAKESPEARE AND THE GOSPEL DISCUSSED

Covenant-First Presbyterian Church, 717 Elm St., downtown, will conclude its "The Gospel According to Shakespeare" series Wednesday from 6 to 7 p.m. at the church.

The series, which coincides with the Cincinnati Shakespeare Festival, is a Bible study and discussion group centered on themes in Shakespeare's plays. This week's discussion is on the play Richard III.

"This is an opportunity for people who love Shakespeare and love scripture to get together and discuss themes and really have a great and lively discussion," said the Rev. Russell Smith, who leads the group.

The series begins again in the fall to coincide with the festival's 2006-07 season.

To submit religion news, e-mail kbvance@adelphia.net or send a fax to (513) 755-4150.