

Appendix 1

Full Vision – Shaare Emeth 2028

I am honored to be able to address you today in 2028 at the 161st Annual Meeting of Congregation Shaare Emeth. When we began our strategic planning process three years ago, the world and the Jewish community were in a very challenging place. The war between Israel and Hamas had not ended, and antisemitism, here and abroad, was continuing to rise. In our nation, democratic institutions that once brought a sense of safety and support to communal life were being dismantled, minority groups were being targeted, and feelings of isolation and extreme polarization were taking their toll. I am so proud that, during a time of increasing difficulty and need in the world around us, Congregation Shaare Emeth remained a beacon of hope for our members and for the greater community. We evolved to meet the moment and laid the foundation that will allow us to meet the important moments that are yet to come.

Today we come together in celebration, united by our congregational commitments and Reform Jewish values that have sustained us throughout the generations: to listen and learn from our Jewish tradition and from each other, to treat one another with kindness and respect, to work toward a more just and peaceful world, to support each other in times of struggle and sorrow, and to celebrate with one another in times of gratitude and joy.

We also come together with an eye to the future, building on our amazing success over the past three years. We have evolved our mission from “*Congregation Shaare Emeth is a compassionate, respectful, and inclusive community that makes Judaism relevant, meaningful, and joyful*” to better reflect our priorities of deepening our connections with our faith, with our community, and with our people through intentional relationship building. We are committed to our vision of Shaare Emeth as a center for spiritual nourishment and innovation (a Beit Tefilah), for impactful Jewish learning (a Beit Midrash), and for meaningful connections within and throughout the community (a Beit Kehillah) for all. In a time of rising antisemitism, Shaare Emeth remains a safe place for people to express, explore, struggle with and rejoice in their Judaism.

Based on this clarity, we have done a thorough audit of our programs, staff, and facility, making sure that all aspects of congregational life are aligned with our mission. Knowing that our clergy play a key role in fostering our renewed mission and vision, we are proud to have completed a successful transition of our new Senior Rabbi and have an incredible clergy team and staff in place who embody the qualities of warmth and wisdom, kindness and care, and a passion for inspiring a love of Judaism in others. We have also focused on creating a culture of continuing innovation and improvement – listening to our members through survey and focus groups, exploring new experiential opportunities, evaluating them and investing in them as appropriate. Members feel seen and heard by the clergy, the staff, and by each other, and we all continue to show up for one another in good times and bad.

During a time when organized religious institutions are shrinking, we are proud that the size of our membership has remained stable and healthy. We have invested significant energy in creating a deep sense of engagement across all ages and stages of life. Youth, young adults and families

with young children are finding peers with whom they can create authentic, lifelong relationships, and empty nesters and older adults are returning to active participation in the congregation to share and gain wisdom, become mentors, and give back to the congregation and greater community. We remain a [Reform Zionist congregation](#) which means we are committed to a vision of Israel as a democratic and pluralistic Jewish state guaranteeing freedom and safety for all of its inhabitants and working toward peace with her neighbors. We strive to build meaningful relationships with the people of Israel through educational, programmatic and travel opportunities, welcoming a variety of views and understandings about the best ways to support Israel and her people.

We have seen a renewed sense of generosity towards the congregation, and we are grateful that philanthropic donations to Shaare Emeth have increased at every level. Our endowments are strong, and we feel secure that Shaare Emeth will be here to share the beauty and warmth of our Reform Jewish traditions, heritage and values *l'dor vador*, from one generation to the next.

Beit Tefilah – A House of Prayer

People increasingly turn to their faith during times of uncertainty, and over the past three years Shaare Emeth has provided a safe space for members to find comfort in the midst of community. We are proud of our clergy team who bring a sense of warmth, meaning, and joy to all our worship experiences. Shabbat worship connects members across the generations, deepening our experiences of and connections to God, Judaism, and one another. Music uplifts the spirit, and prayers and sermons inspire hope, as well as challenge everyone to live out their Reform Jewish values in ways that are aspirational and respectful. Worship is participatory, with members of all ages joining the clergy to create experiences that help us transcend feelings of isolation and realize that we are an important part of something so much larger than our single selves. Members feel inspired to be present in the sanctuary during Shabbat and holiday celebrations not only to rejoice together with the community, but also to offer comfort to those who have experienced loss. Streaming services through Boxcast or Facebook allows those unable to attend worship in-person to still feel connected to the community. Life cycle moments connect families to their Jewish heritage and tradition while still feeling personal and unique.

Beit Midrash – A House of Learning

Jewish learning is valued in every aspect of congregational life, and we continue to regularly invest in the training and support of our teachers and staff.

Preschool – Over the past three years, Shirlee Green Preschool has maintained its excellent educational standards that make it one of the premier preschools in St. Louis. The Preschool Director and staff took up the challenge to infuse even more Jewish learning and celebration into each school year. From a new website to the children's stories and crafts that decorate the preschool halls, you can feel the Jewish values that are the foundation for this incredible community. Clergy have a stronger presence in the classrooms each week, and this has led to a greater sense of belonging and connection to the congregation among Shirlee Green families. More families are enrolling their preschool graduates into our J Quest Religious School program, and we have seen an increase in the number of unaffiliated Jewish preschool families who choose to become members of Shaare Emeth.

Religious School – From J Quest through Post Confirmation, Shaare Emeth’s Religious School is the best synagogue-based Religious School in St. Louis. The school has continued to welcome students at all levels of learning and ability, and our inclusion specialist works with families on an individual basis to ensure the best possible experience for every child. Students want to be at Shaare Emeth for Religious School because they are engaged in Jewish learning that is authentic, relevant, and fun. At every grade level our teachers are passionate about what they do, inspiring students to be proud of who they are as Jews, encouraging them to give back to the communities in which they live, and instilling in them a desire to want to pass Judaism onto the next generation. We’ve seen enrollment grow in our younger grades and remain stable as students matriculate through the school. Students find Shaare Emeth to be a supportive space to explore their spirituality, share their pride in being Jewish, and find support in confronting antisemitism . The majority of B Mitzvah students continue with their Jewish education through Confirmation, with many more continuing on through high school graduation. More students are opting to be madrichim in the Religious School because they want to follow in the footsteps of the wonderful madrichim who taught them. Once students are in high school, they have at least two opportunities to travel with their fellow students on trips that deepen their understanding of Jewish values and connect them to their Jewish heritage and culture. These trips are heavily subsidized so that price is not a barrier for families. Family programs at all grade levels are well-attended, and special attention is paid to creating opportunities for parents to get to know one another so that a feeling of genuine community in each grade is felt.

Informal Learning Opportunities – Our Director of Youth Engagement has built a thriving Youth Engagement program that allows students from Grade 3 through High School to find their place within the larger congregational community. The Director also partners with other Jewish youth organizations, including BBYO, JSU, Student-to-Student, and more to help students find community in the larger St. Louis community as well. The students are excited and proud to represent Shaare Emeth in a variety of communal spaces throughout St. Louis. Camp Emeth is full summer after summer, and its program continues to expand and deepen, finding the right balance of honoring camp traditions while introducing new and exciting elements each summer for campers and staff. Staff are excited to spend their summer instilling a love of Judaism in their campers, and we are proud that staff retention numbers are strong.

Adult Learning Opportunities – Adults at all ages and stages of life are excited to expand their learning of Jewish history, culture, values, texts, and Israel. Just entering the building offers opportunities to learn something new about one’s Judaism. Digital signage and posters allow members and guests to learn something new about Judaism that helps us feel proud of our faith. Every class, even online offerings, include time and intentionally planned activities that allow members to get to know one another at a deeper level. We have worked hard, through an expanded Adult Learning Committee and specially designed discussion programs, to create a culture where different ideas can be presented, listened to, and respected. Beyond classes, every meeting at temple begins with a moment of learning – initiated not only by clergy and staff, but by lay leaders and members as well. We have a robust Adult B Mitzvah program that people are eager to register for, and a beautiful ceremony that occurs every other year that is attended by any members of the congregation and greater community.

Beit Kehillah – A House of Belonging

Shaare Emeth is known throughout St. Louis as a warm, welcoming, down-to-earth congregation. We are an extension of our members' Jewish home, and the first place our members look to have their Jewish spiritual, educational, cultural, and communal needs met because they know that here, they will discover innovative programming that encourages deep connections to their faith and to each other. We honor the *tzelem Elohim* (the divine image) within every person and strive to make Shaare Emeth a welcoming community where everyone including interfaith families, people seeking conversion, single member households, people with special needs, and people of all races, genders, and sexual identities, feel like they belong. We honor diversity of thought among our members and help to facilitate respectful dialogue across lines of difference so that all of our members feel seen and heard.

We have done an audit of our current programs, sunseting those that no longer serve our members and mission well. We have also invested in a full-time Director of Membership Engagement whose expertise in relationship building is transforming the congregation. These investments of time and resources have opened new opportunities for membership engagement including new small groups programming that encourages members to come together in a variety of ways to pursue their passions (which may or may not be directly connected to Judaism) while forming deeper communal ties. Congregational programming allows members to activate their Jewish ideals. Members care for other members, for the greater Jewish community, for Israel, for the greater St. Louis, state and national communities, and for the environment through a dedication to *g'milut chasadim* (acts of loving kindness) and *tikkun olam* (repairing the world). Members feel stronger and more hopeful when acting together as part of their community, and they are proud of the ways their congregation contributes to the world around them.

Programming at Shaare Emeth is driven through a partnership of staff and lay people so that our members have a true sense of ownership and investment in the congregation. Over these past few years, special attention has been given to reinvigorated programming for young adults (introducing them to the value of community that can be found in congregational life) and empty nesters (reminding them of community that can be found in congregational life). Major travel opportunities for adults and families – to Israel and other cultural and educational destinations – occur at least every other year, bonding members, clergy and staff in unique and meaningful ways.

With its new Advisory Board, the Jewish Mindfulness Center of St. Louis is thriving with numerous offerings each month led by a variety of teachers. There also a number of ongoing support groups (widow/widowers, caregivers, addictions, healing, etc.) that meet in the Mindfulness Center that bring members and non-members together. Through the Mindfulness Center, Shaare Emeth is known to be a place of compassionate care for many in the greater community. The Jewish Mindfulness Center has also hired its first staff person and is generating income to not only sustain its programming but also contribute to the congregation as well.

Staff

We know that one of our greatest strengths at Shaare Emeth is our incredible staff. The congregation has a long history of hiring clergy whose dedication to our members and to the values of our faith is without compare. Therefore, succession planning for Shaare Emeth's new Senior Rabbi after Rabbi Bennett's retirement was a top priority. To prepare for this moment, the

congregation's leadership worked to ensure that the entire staff, including key clergy and engagement directors, had been secured. This first step required an evolution of our organizational chart with clear definitions and delineation of roles and responsibilities. We structure our staff to reflect our congregation's highest priorities – engagement with youth and young families, engagement with empty-nesters, music engagement, and development.

Rabbi Bennett's service to the congregation was celebrated and his retirement marked in meaningful ways, and the rabbinic transition to a new senior rabbi has been successful and smooth for both members and staff. The roles of the emeriti rabbis have been defined and agreed upon, and the new Senior Rabbi has laid out a vision for the congregation that has been excitedly embraced.

Our full-time staff is made up of incredibly creative, compassionate, hard-working individuals who love their jobs and the congregation. They believe in our mission and understand how their work contributes to the fulfillment of our vision. Because the staff is our greatest resource, investments have been made to ensure that their work experience is the best that it can be. The first investment was to redirect the HR committee to focus on establishing a performance management system of goal setting and reviews. Transparent and equitable systems are now in place that set clear goals/expectations, hold staff accountable and celebrate the fulfillment of their responsibilities and goals. Supervisors are trained to best support the staff, and we have created and implemented an onboarding system for new staff.

The executive leadership team and the HR committee, with support from the board, prioritized helping the staff to feel valued by the leadership, by our members, and by one another. A culture of trust, open dialogue, collaboration, and transparency has been established, and everyone on the staff has committed to doing their part to see that these norms continue. The staff has come together to improve communications between departments and between the Clergy/Directors and the Admin staff. There is a greater feeling of trust within the organization, and we work more closely with one another on the board.

Board/Governance

A new Governance Committee has helped us establish our priorities for lay leadership roles and responsibilities in the congregation. These priorities include a more robust committee structure, the formation of a relevant Leadership Development program, and a solidified onboarding process for new board members. Special attention was given to redefining the role of the past presidents, leading to reenergized support, engagement, and commitments from our most experienced leaders. A growing number of working committees have been established, and along with the good work these committees have been doing, they have also served as a means to identify future board members. Our revised Leadership Development program has been met with much enthusiasm, with members of the first cohorts already stepping up onto committees, as well as the Board. The reinvigorated committees and Leadership Development program create a strong future leadership pipeline, and a comprehensive onboarding process ensures board members feel well-prepared for their service.

Responsibilities of Board members are clearly communicated to anyone wishing to serve on the board. These include partnering with the clergy and staff in big-picture strategizing, attending board meetings and congregational services and programs, contributing financially at the highest

level they are able, and actively engaging in helping the Development Director and staff raise funds for the congregation. Board level service is seen as something to aspire to within the community, and board members take great pride in the congregation and in the work that they do. It is known that to serve on the Board of Trustees means more than just attending meetings. Each board member feels a sense of ownership of the congregation and sees it as their responsibility to show up during worship services and programs, welcoming and getting to know the members, helping to create a culture of appreciation and belonging for all our members and guests.

Financial Sustainability

Ensuring that Shaare Emeth is financially secure for today and tomorrow has been one of our highest priorities. We have accomplished this important goal with a multi-pronged approach. First, we have invested in a full time Development Director whose partnership with the Executive Director and senior clergy has reenergized our lay leadership to be full partners in fulfilling our financial sustainability goals. Second, we have begun a serious cultural shift to inspire all of our members to view the congregation less as a “fee-for-service” organization that they have to join, and more as a genuine source of community in which they feel inspired to invest. Lay leaders and staff came together to answer the question, “Why invest in Shaare Emeth?” and the answers generated helped to create a story that was shared in different ways with our members and investors that has resulted in increased annual giving across the board. All board members engage with the Development Director to model a culture of philanthropy, leading to members feeling a responsibility to give at the highest levels that they can.

In addition to a reinvigorated culture of philanthropy, we have also created a culture of connection and gratitude when it comes to donations made to Shaare Emeth. Members are thanked in personal ways by staff and lay leaders every time they make any sort of financial contribution to the congregation. There has also been a gentle education campaign to make members aware of the ways that they express their appreciation for the ways that the congregation has been there to celebrate with them at numerous celebratory life cycle moments, as well as when the clergy and members have provided comfort for them during challenging moments in their lives.

Finally, Rabbi Bennett’s retirement offered a unique opportunity to increase our endowments, and we are grateful for the work that he and others did to make that special endowment campaign a success. We have continued to market our Planned Giving campaign, setting and meeting a goal of how many members we are able to meet with and enroll each year. We have also added at least two new members to our Emet Society each year and increased the membership of our Ner Tamid Society.

Facilities

Our building is a physical manifestation of our vision and values. Over the past three years we have invested in making sure that our facilities are maintained at a level of excellence that allows us to pursue our programmatic mission and vision. Our staff and lay leadership updated the site plan that was created in 2022, and use it as a road map for large/small projects, and scheduled repair and replacement.

At the beginning of the strategic plan, major renovations to the North Lobby, Religious School wing, and the Preschool wing had not occurred since 2002/2003. The Preschool rooms were designed for a smaller number of students per room and shorter days. The Religious School rooms were designed for a more formal style of education than we currently offer and don't fully meet the needs of our program. The classrooms also were not designed with the thought that they would be utilized by our summer camp as heavily as they are today. Due to elevated summer temperatures, campers need to be either inside or in shaded areas during a greater part of their days.

We embarked on a plan to prioritize how renovations to better meet our needs for the future would begin. We are proud of our efforts to renew the areas of the building dedicated to Shirlee Green Preschool and Camp Emeth, both income drivers for the congregation. These improvements allow more campers, preschool students and their families to enroll in our programs and have facilitated the staff in being able to provide the best Jewish day camp and early childhood education experiences in St. Louis.

Operations and Communications

We have been moving towards operational excellence since 2024 when we hired a new Executive Director and are proud of all the improvements that our ED, staff and lay leaders have made. We have reviewed operational processes, revised them, re-trained our staff and documented standard operating procedures in multiple areas. Working together, the Board and staff have developed a compelling story of what it means to be a member of congregation Shaare Emeth, and all lay leaders and staff members have become congregational ambassadors, sharing that story with members, potential members, and guests. Our external communications are much improved with membership and the community at large up to speed on the innovative programs, services, events, and celebrations at the congregation. We have invested in our social media strategy, and we are now using various platforms to share our stories as widely as possible. Internal communications have also improved, with the staff feeling more connected and involved with all that is happening at the congregation.

Conclusion

In Parashat *Terumah* in the Book of Exodus, Moses commands the Israelites to build a Mishkan, a sacred space in which God's presence will dwell. Because this is a command, we might believe that the Israelites had no choice *but* to contribute to this undertaking. However, what God actually says to Moses is this: *Speak to the children of Israel and say to them: "Bring a gift for me, from every person whose heart is so moved... Make Me a sanctuary, that I might dwell among them."* (Ex. 25:2, 8)

Moses extends an invitation to the people to be a part of something truly special – creating both a space and a community where God's presence will be known and felt. The people were asked to bring physical materials like wood, precious metals, and jewels. And according to the Torah, everyone gave. Everyone felt inspired to be a part of this undertaking and this community.

Today, when we are engaged in the continuous process of creating and renewing what it means to be a part of a sacred community, the materials are different. Instead of fabrics and metals we donate our time, our money, and most importantly our presence. We show up for one another

again and again. Three years ago, through the establishment of our strategic plan, we laid out a blueprint to guide us as we reignited our commitment to this sacred Shaare Emeth community. And we are incredibly proud of the work that we have done in bringing this vision to life. Together we have deepened our connections to our faith, to this community, and to each other. As we conclude this annual meeting today, there is an overwhelming sense of gratitude for the part that each of us has played. We have devoted ourselves so beautifully to a community where Judaism comes alive through meaningful relationships and connections, deepened Jewish learning, joyful worship and life cycle celebrations, and a commitment to *tikkun olam* – to working together to build a world on the foundations of justice, compassion, and peace. May these commitments and this community continue to sustain us as we go from strength to strength. Amen.

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