

Interim Rabbi Helping Build a Better Beth El Congregation Winchester Star, September 13, 2016

WINCHESTER — Now that its previous rabbi has taken the road to retirement, members at Winchester's Beth El Congregation are working to find a new leader. In May, they hired Rabbi Peter Grumbacher to serve as a part-time interim rabbi as they continue the search.

"There's a great foundation in the congregation," Grumbacher said. "I want to help them build upon it."

Former Beth El rabbi Scott Sperling retired in June. Grumbacher began working Friday and will take on the responsibilities of a rabbi while at the synagogue, including preaching, teaching and visiting the sick.

"The major part is to work with the congregation to get them focused to choose the right rabbi," the 69-year-old said. After he was hired in May, he received preliminary training. He also started some of his duties during the summer by working with two children in preparation for their bar mitzvahs.

Currently living in Wilmington, Del., he will make about 20 visits to the synagogue between now and June, spending time there on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays.

Prior to studying to be an interim rabbi, Grumbacher led his own congregation for 37 years at Congregation Beth Emeth in Delaware, which had about 700 families.

He retired at the age of 62 and wanted to continue a lecture he had done in 2003 titled "Sharing the Silence: The Son of a Holocaust Survivor Tells His Father's Story." He said he also wanted a new experience in the rabbinate.

From 2007 to 2008, he studied to be an interim rabbi at the Interim Ministry Network in Baltimore. He was trained to understand how people view their role in a congregation, to learn the history of a synagogue and get an idea of how a congregation can move forward.

"It's a very intensive program," he said.

Earlier this year, Beth El Congregation, 520 Fairmont Ave., was searching for someone to step in after Sperling's retirement. Grumbacher's son, David — the president of Beth El Congregation — reached out to him. Grumbacher told his son to let him know if he could help.

"I didn't think it would be at this capacity," he said.

Grumbacher's daughter-in-law Debbie also serves as educator at Beth El.

During his time at Beth El, Grumbacher would like to see the congregation's membership grow. The synagogue currently has a membership of 75 families. He would

also like for the members to strengthen their identities in the congregation and participate in all aspects at the synagogue.

"I also want to make [Beth El] fiscally healthy," he said. "And to get them prepared to have a vision and a mission to attract a full-time rabbi."

Grumbacher also has some limits while working with Beth El.

"I have the limit of time and a limit of what I can do in that time," he said.

Grumbacher has served as a director in education in Delaware and plans to be active in Beth El's religious school. The school holds classes for children ages 5 to 16 and prepares young members for bat and bar mitzvahs.

"I enjoy teaching," Grumbacher said. "I like the give and take. I want the children to feel comfortable in their Jewish identity and teach them Judaism is serious as well as festive."

Grumbacher still works with the congregation in Delaware when his successor needs assistance. He has been married to his wife, Suzy, for 47 years. The couple has three children and four grandchildren.

Anyone interested in reaching out to Grumbacher while he is at Beth El may send him an email at interimbethelrabbi@gmail.com.

###