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Synagogue President Henry Weinrib hopes a recently instituted Friday evening service helps to revive Congregation Beth Abraham.

John Hickey/Buffalo News

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Elmwood shul seeking new worshippers

By Jay Tokasz

NEWS STAFF REPORTER

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The humble shul on Elmwood Avenue sometimes struggles to get enough participants for minyan, a formal worship service that under Jewish law requires at least 10 adults.

Congregation Beth Abraham, sandwiched between two successful restaurants near the corner of Bird Avenue, is barely noticeable on the bustling Elmwood strip. Its congregation presses on anyway, as it has for generations.

Each week, with or without a minyan, members pray and sing together and keep the place together as best they can.

“The bottom line is, it must be that somebody wants it to be here,” said synagogue President and

longtime member Harry Weinrib.

The aging congregation is trying to plant the seeds of a revival.

It recently introduced a once-a-month Friday evening service that's heavy on music and singing and easy on theology and doctrine.

So far, the popularity of the new services— led by Irwin H. Gelman in the style of the “Friday Night Live” celebrations that became renowned in New York City’s Congregation B’nai Jeshurun — has surprised even longtime members.

The first service in May attracted about 60 people. Nearly 100 people showed up for the June service.

“It went over even bigger than the first one,” said Oscar Smukler, a longtime member.

The Kabbalat Shabbat services, followed by oneg kiddush — a blessing, social time and small meal — are a departure for the unaffiliated but traditionally Orthodox-leaning shul, which at one time kept separate seating arrangements for men and women.

The synagogue still draws decent crowds for high holiday services, but not so much during the rest of the year.

“It’s a very sweet old place,” said Gelman, who moved to Buffalo about six years ago for a post at Roswell Park Cancer Institute.

Gelman stumbled upon the shul after the death of his father. The synagogue was close to his home, so he showed up for a Sabbath service to recite the Kaddish prayer, per Jewish tradition.

“Many times, they didn’t have a minyan, so if I wanted to say Kaddish I had to go somewhere else,” said Gelman, who had served as a cantor in a New York City synagogue for many years and is still a member of the Cantorial Assembly. “I came here first because it was close. They did have a minyan, but not every Friday night and Saturday morning.”

The congregation doesn’t have a rabbi or a cantor, so Gelman agreed to lead the special Friday services, which feature upbeat Hassidic melodies in the style of the charismatic Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, who was known for songs that include clapping, stomping and humming.

The congregation hopes to attract unaffiliated Jews in the city to replenish its dwindling ranks and stave off closure.

Neighboring Pano’s restaurant and Mister Pizza already have expressed interest in the property should the shul shut down, said Weinrib and Smukler.

“Both restaurants would like us to sell the building so they could knock it down for parking,” said Smukler, whose father was one of the shul’s founding members more than 80 years ago.

Tony Colicchia, owner of Mister Pizza, acknowledged that the property, as an empty lot, could be useful for his business.

“Of course, I could use the parking. But push comes to shove, I don’t think they’d sell it,” said Colicchia.

Smukler and Weinrib are both in their 80s, but neither of them plans on giving up on the place.

“I know as long as Harry and I are alive it won’t close,” said Smukler. “I think there’s nothing worse than closing a place of worship, regardless of what religion it is. So it’s SOS — save our shul.”

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