Kol Ami:

History of a Thriving Community

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Acknowledgments

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1 Founding

Our living room origins

Kol Ami has its origins in the Northern Virginia Reconstructionist Havurah, whose August 1995 by-laws appear in the minutes of the first annual meeting of the Northern Virginia Reconstructionist Community. The havurah (an informal Jewish fellowship group), was friendly but small, meeting in various members' homes in the Washington area. We wonder whether our origin as a close-knit community is one of the reasons we are who we are today.

Rayna Aylward wrote in 2017, "We only gathered for major holidays and used a tiny Torah that looked like it came from a Bar Mitzvah cake." In addition to the toy Torah, the group used photocopied prayers and liturgical recordings by the late tenor Jan Peerce, sometimes supplemented by a member on the clarinet.

We wonder how much this origin as a close-knit community is why we are who we are today.

Sometime in the fall of 2000, Rayna and her husband Ed Bomsey invited Don Kraus and his wife Hope Warshaw, Mattie Cohan, Cookie Perlmutter and David Perlmutter z"l (may his memory be blessed) to their Annandale living room to discuss the future of the group. The havurah, they concluded, was simply too small. They lacked a minyan and a rabbi, and some members had moved out of town. "We decided," Rayna recalled, "that we needed to either go big or go away."

Mason District Community Center

In October 2000, Ed booked a room at the Mason District Center for 10 am on Sunday, December 10, and placed an ad in the Washington Jewish Week, seeking like-minded people interested in forming a Reconstructionist congregation. Meanwhile, Don Kraus asked the Reconstructionist movement for names of rabbis and was advised to call Rabbi Leila Gal Berner.

The application said that 40 people might attend, and the organizers expected that perhaps twenty or twenty-five people would show. Instead, Ed and Rayna recall, "people kept coming through the door," requiring them to search for more chairs. Eventually, around fifty people crowded together. Rabbi Leila spoke about Reconstructionism, and by the end of the meeting, the Northern Virginia Reconstructionist Community had begun. Some of the early founders are still active in the congregation today, including Ed and Rayna, Mattie

Cohan, Harriet Epstein, Joan Goldfarb and Gordon Achtermann, Mark Graboyes, Leslie Lesner, Jim North, Jane Petkofsky, Erv Walter, and Mindi Weisenbloom.

First High Holidays, 2001

In the August 31, 2001 edition of the Washington Post, the Northern Virginia Reconstructionist Community advertised its upcoming High Holiday services, with the slogan, "Progressive Jews creating an atmosphere of warmth and inclusivity." David and Cookie Perlmutter borrowed a Torah for the occasion. Eleven days later, terrorists hijacked four airplanes, crashing one of them into the Pentagon in Arlington. As Barbara Jazzo recalls, the subsequent High Holidays, which began on the evening of September 17, were somber but profound.

Choosing a name

The first official name of the congregation was the Northern Virginia Reconstructionist Community, or NVRC. By the second annual meeting, in June 2002, congregants were debating the addition of a Hebrew name, with two proposals: "Anshay Ruach, loosely translated as People of Spirit," and "Ayked Chaverim, loosely translated as Gathering of Friends." Rabbi Leila's own suggestion was Lev Shalem (a full heart), but she deferred to the wishes of the congregation.

Eventually, in 2003 the congregation chose the name Kol Ami: the Northern Virginia Reconstructionist Community. Kol Ami means Voice of My People, and expresses our love of music, Jewish community, and making all of our voices heard.

2 Logistics

Meeting places

As an earlier history of the congregation relates, after the organizing meeting at the Mason District Community Center, Cookie and David Perlmutter began searching for a place to hold services: "Cookie called every public facility in the Arlington area that she could think of. Neither libraries nor schools would allow us to use their facilities. She also called several large churches who were most accommodating until they realized we were a synagogue, then they closed their doors. Cookie called the Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington (UUCA) who said they were agreeable to talking to us. David and Cookie went immediately to meet Barbara Gilligan. She initially allowed us to use the church once a month. We borrowed Siddurim from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in PA and shipped them back every month. We schlepped paper goods and service paraphernalia back and forth from Don Kraus's garage as well. It took about six months before we rented the closet space and began to acquire supplies to be used on an ongoing basis."

In its early years, the congregation met at times at the UUCA and at other times at the Church of the Covenant on Military Road. Eventually, the congregation was able to hold all its regular services at the UUCA, along with other events in members' homes. Over the years, the congregation has grown closer to the UUCA, despite our having scorched a Formica counter in the kitchen while preparing our first Passover seder. Since the shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in 2018, Kol Ami's Security team of Jonathan Baumgarten and Gordon Achtermann has been working closely with the UUCA and the larger Jewish community to develop security systems and procedures to enhance our safety.

We deeply appreciate the good working relationship we've had with the staff and pastors of the UUCA. Several joint programs have taken place over the years, with Rabbi Gilah co-leading classes with Rev. Linda Olson Peebles and Rev. Amanda Poppei, and both Rev. Carol Thomas Cissel and Rabbi Gilah speaking at each other's services.

In its quarter-century of existence, Kol Ami has never seriously—and perhaps never at all—discussed purchasing or building its own building. As Mattie Cohan explains, such a space would require a much higher dues structure, and expensive tickets for High Holiday services. While such measures are needed to pay a mortgage, that's not what the congregation wanted. The focus, Rabbi Leila recalls, was on the people.

In addition to being a welcoming community, the UUCA is a building of astonishing beauty, which in 2014 (the 50th anniversary of its completion) earned a listing on the National Register of Historic Places. As the nomination form explains, architect Charles Goodman (ne Goldman) designed the sanctuary in relationship to a wooded knoll. The sanctuary windows admit light and views of the trees, changing through the seasons and the course of the day.

Online

The NVRC established a website and an email list soon after its formation, though the 2001 annual meeting report noted that "while most of us have e-mail and access to the worldwide web, not all of us do and we cannot rely on the web as our sole means of reaching out to the Community."

In 2015, the congregation commissioned a new logo from designer Leslie Garvey. After considerable discussion, a committee chose a version with a Star of David composed of pointed shapes in orange, green, and blue, with a smaller Star of David created by the negative space in the center.

At the same time, the congregation updated its website, transitioning from its original Internet domain name, kolaminvrc.org, to the more elegant kolamivirginia.org, and

employing web designer Hirsch Fishman to set up a WordPress-based site to replace the original Drupal.

In March 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic arrived in full force, the congregation had to abandon in-person gatherings and establish a robust online presence. Support groups on Zoom were held in the first few months of the pandemic; Shabbat services were moved online; and we learned the hard way that singing together over Zoom is not advisable!

At the very start of the pandemic, with all in-person activities cancelled, Rabbi Richard Ruth z"l had the inspiration to start a Morning Minyan on Zoom. Few members thought it would last very long, but by the end of the first month of 4-day-a-week minyans, the practice had a dedicated following – and most mornings there was at least a full minyan plus. As Rabbi Richard told *Reconstructing Judaism* in October 2020, "In some ways, it is like spiritual coffee in the morning. In other ways, it feels like being part of the living crucible of tikkun olam."

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<u>Membership and finances</u>

Membership has grown steadily since our founding, with a net gain of a few individuals and families each year, and rarely if ever a net shrinkage. In a summer 2020 community survey, some respondents expressed their wish for a somewhat larger community, to support more programs without losing the close-knit sense of community. Under the leadership of Debra Linick, our Membership committee became an active force in recruiting and retaining members, including setting up "congregational buddies" to ease newcomers' integration into the community. "I tried other shuls and nobody welcomed me," recalls Louise Lerner. "We have always welcomed the stranger." As of 2025, the congregation has approximately 100 member households.

For most of its existence, Kol Ami has closely matched income and expenses. As longtime treasurer Erv Walter commented in 2024, "we're frugal, but we have nice things." A bequest by Betsy Greer z"l allowed the congregation to make investments for the first time. Since investments in mutual funds would raise questions about which corporations' actions clash with the congregation's values, the congregation has invested in less controversial Treasury bills. Betsy's gift was also used to fund the new ark, supplemented by donations from the adult B'nai Mitzvah class of 2020. Bequests in memory of Diane Ivone z"l, Mark Weisenbloom z"l, and Rabbi Richard Ruth have supported teen education, adult education, and guest rabbis. Some members have graciously become Sustainers, contributing higher than regular membership dues year after year. The congregation has also held fundraisers when needed for specific purposes, such as helping the UUCA repair

damage from a flood in 2019. In 2022, the congregation achieved IRS classification as a 501(c)(3) public charity.

3 Values

In 2010, Kol Ami identified seven values that "guide our community as we make Reconstructionist Judaism relevant to our modern lives: Spirituality, Community, Diversity, Fellowship, Volunteerism, Inclusion, and Ruach".

Multiple traditions

From its beginnings, Kol Ami has welcomed people who grew up in a variety of traditions, including those from Jewish and other backgrounds, and interfaith families. (Since 1968, the Reconstructionist movement has recognized the children of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers as Jews provided they are raised as Jews.) Erv Walter, who grew up Orthodox but married a Methodist, had tried various congregations in the area, looking for one right for the whole family. "We were looking for a shul that would allow us to be ourselves," he recalled in 2024. Then Erv and Laura attended a Friday night service at Kol Ami and concluded that all were welcome. "The deal was done," he recalled. "We like this place."

> "We were looking for a shul that would allow us to be ourselves."
>
> ■ Erv Walter

In 2020, when members were asked why they remain members, the congregation's "approach to inclusion" was the third-ranked reason. (Tied for first were "welcoming, participatory atmosphere" and "sense of community.") As one respondent wrote, "Some Jewish congregations can feel exclusionary and too absolutist about how Judaism should be observed. Kol Ami should always feel welcoming to our members no matter their manner or level of observance."

Going one step further, in 2017, Kol Ami formalized its inclusive approach to people of other backgrounds, adopting a formal policy that liturgical participation and honors were equally open to Jewish and non-Jewish members. The policy came about after months of study and discussion; it was publicized in the Washington Jewish Week and at the Reconstructionist movement's regional conference. (https://www.kolamivirginia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/At-Kol-Ami-non-Jews-now-participate-fully-Washington-Jewish-Week.pdf)

LGBTQ friendly

Prior to the congregation's establishment, the Reconstructionist movement had embraced gay and lesbian Jews as members and leaders. "As we celebrate the love between heterosexual couples," affirmed a 1992 report, "so too do we celebrate the love between gay or lesbian Jews."

From its start, Kol Ami has celebrated its LGBTQ members, including Rabbi Leila, its founding rabbi. Having faced some pushback at a previous congregation, Rabbi Leila was delighted to find that her sexuality was simply never an issue at Kol Ami.

In 2006, another milestone was reached when two of the pillars of the congregation, Jim North and Richard Ruth, were married at Kol Ami, with Rabbi Leila officiating. The community embraced the couple; over time they became beloved service leaders. Richard became one of Kol Ami's main educators, and was ordained as a rabbi in 2022, the year before he died. Jim became the unofficial hazzan (cantor) of Kol Ami starting with the pandemic years.

Disability awareness

Since 2018, the congregation's Care & Concern/Inclusion committee has sponsored an annual Inclusion Service during Jewish Disability Awareness & Inclusion Month (February). The service, frequently spearheaded by co-chairs Rayna Aylward and Toni Popkin, features prayers and poems by and about individuals with disabilities, and highlights the gifts and accomplishments of people of all abilities.

4 Volunteering

As Hope Warshaw recalls, from the beginning, "volunteerism to support the community was an expectation." Carolyn Gray agrees. "The philosophy was that Kol Ami was a congregation of volunteers," she recalls. "If you were going to be a member, you were going to volunteer, unless you were physically unable to do it." That volunteering has taken a wide range of forms.

"Doing things is my form of services," reports Mattie Cohan. "That's my observance." For years, Mattie and others have led various forms of social service and social action. That often took the form of a High Holiday food drive, collecting food and cash donations for the Capital Area Food Bank or Arlington Food Assistance Program. Other efforts included visits to elder care homes, making sandwiches, and park and stream clean-ups led by Elenor Hodges.

In the early 2020s, the congregation's Tikkun Olam committee turned to refugee care, working with Lutheran Social Services, NoVa RAFT, and other organizations to provide goods and aid to Afghan refugee families. Two families were "adopted" and members provided a host of services, including collection drives, rent assistance, weekly driving to food centers and medical appointments, tutoring, help with filling out forms and applications, and more.

Ad hoc responses to illness and death in the community evolved into the Care and Concern Committee, first led by Janice Cooper z"l, and in 2023, a monthly grief support group in response to the passing of Rabbi Richard Ruth. As Herb Levy recalls, "If there is need the community fills it, virtually birth to death. As the community perceived needs, people rose to champion those needs." The Care & Concern Committee under the leadership of Rayna Aylward and Toni Popkin came to be called Care & Concern, Inc., with "Inc." standing for inclusion, as Kol Ami tackled various aspects of inclusion in recent years.

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> ■ Carolyn Gray

In addition to the Tikkun Olam and Care & Concern, Inc. committees, Kol Ami's active committees include Ritual, Adult Education, Security, and Membership. As many have marveled, for a community of our size, we are able to do an amazing amount!

5 Worship

Traditions

From its founding, Kol Ami has been affiliated with the Reconstructionist movement, founded in the early 20th century by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan. As Rabbi Leila explains it, most Reconstructionist congregations are relatively small, and emphasize community leadership. The rabbi, she notes, "is there as facilitator and educator, not the be-all and end-all of the community."

Early in the congregation's history, Rabbi Leila learned that the congregation valued three elements in a service: teaching, singing, and participation. The rabbi should not merely lead prayers but also explain their significance. Cookie Perlmutter recalls members' interrupting services to ask a question, getting an explanation from Rabbi Leila, and then resuming. Discussions during Shabbat services did not shy away from challenging and contemporary topics; a concerted effort has always been made to bring our progressive values into our spiritual lives.

For the most part, prayers would be sung, not read. And with or without a rabbi present, members would lead and take part in much of the worship, bringing to services their own emphases. One service would be more traditional, one more cerebral, one more spiritual, one more musical. Similarly, the congregation has long mixed official publications from the Reconstructionist movement with poetry and other readings written or assembled by members.

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The congregation has also borrowed from other traditions, reflecting its members' varied upbringing and background. For example, traditionally only those in mourning or observing a Yahrzeit stand for the Mourner's Kaddish, but in many Reform congregations it is customary for the entire congregation to stand. Rabbi Leila feared that this could deprive mourners of their specific moment and the others of the knowledge of who might need consolation. To compromise, she encouraged only mourners to rise at first, but for others to rise midway through the prayer.

Rabbi Leila herself has been influenced by the Jewish Renewal movement, which is reflected in the congregation's custom of saying the Shema slowly, word by word, to encourage concentration. Barbara Jazzo, who reconnected to Judaism through meditation, notes that by focusing on just portions of a few prayers, rather than trying to rush through the Siddur, the congregation can promote both spiritual and intellectual reflection. "You weren't just saying the prayer," she reflects. "You were thinking about it, singing about it."

Torahs and other ritual objects

In January 2004, while on vacation in Israel, member Darrin Kafka purchased four Torah scrolls, all of which were non-kosher due to some flaws, and therefore significantly less expensive than a kosher scroll. As Kafka told *Washington Jewish Week* at the time, Kol Ami members—who then numbered only 35—debated between a larger, older Torah, said to have survived the Holocaust, and a three-quarter size Torah that would be easier to carry, before finding the funds to purchase both. Laurie Solnik crocheted a cover, still in use in the 2020s. The larger Torah was given away in 2024 because it was not salvageable for repair.

Early in the congregation's history, perhaps around 2005, members joined to create a memorial quilt, with panels in memory of loved ones who had passed. Two decades later, that quilt is still used to cover the table on which the Torah rests as it is read.

In 2021, the congregation commissioned its own ark from designer Alex Gruss of Brooklyn. Crafted of cherry wood, with a Ner Tamid of copper, the ark can be wheeled into the main sanctuary or other rooms in the UUCA. It is inscribed with the congregation's name and the verse from Song of Songs, "Let Me Hear Your Voice." In 2024, Kol Ami member Mark Harbour built a base for the ark to stand on that lends stability to the structure as it is moved around the UU. In honor of the 25th anniversary of Kol Ami, Mark is building a Torah lectern that will echo the design of the ark and make it easier to read Torah.

Shabbat

For many years, Kol Ami held Shabbat services two or three times a month. But in 2020, during the pandemic, the congregation began regularly hosting four Shabbat services a month -- three on Saturday morning and once a month on Friday evenings. Shabbat services tend to be informal, with members dressed casually.

Shabbat services follow the traditional liturgical template, but with an ever-changing mix of musical melodies, poetry, readings, and discussion topics. We hold a series of special Shabbatot during the year – a Healing Service, an Inclusion Shabbat, School Shabbat in which our JCEP students take a prominent role, and Pride Shabbat. In the last few years, we have paid additional attention to food as a means of fostering community – Shabbat morning kiddush has been supplemented by "Kiddush Plus" with bagels and full shmears once a month, and in 2024 we added a monthly Shabbat dinner after Friday night services.

Meanwhile, the congregation's blessing over the bread mixes levity, liturgical Hebrew, and a bit of conversational Hebrew. First, everyone joins in a human chain. Prior to 2020, we sang, "Put your hand on the hand of the one who holds the challah/Put your hand on the hand of the one who holds the bread!" With the start of the pandemic, hands were replaced by elbows, a custom that endured even after it was established that Covid spreads primarily through airborne transmission. As Rabbi Leila notes, the communal touching is common in many congregations, but she thinks the "ditty" came from Kol Ami itself.

Second, we sing the Hamotzi with the traditional melody. Next, everyone sings "B'tayavon!," modern Hebrew for bon appétit! Finally, with a shout of "pull!" members pull apart the challah and distribute pieces to all in attendance. Once a simple instruction on how to dismember a challah for distribution, the shout of "pull!" has taken on an element of ritual.

Cookie Perlmutter, one of the founding members, recalled of Shabbat services, "I always walked out feeling a great deal of peace."

Tot Shabbat / Kids' Shabbat

Starting around 2018, Kol Ami has offered either Tot Shabbat (led by Andrea Cate, and then Ari Jacobson) or Kids' Shabbat which is oriented toward school-age kids. These monthly programs are aimed at giving families with children an introduction to Shabbat melodies and prayers, as well as a cohort of others with whom to socialize.

High Holidays

High Holidays at Kol Ami are a peak moment of the year. As Rabbi Gilah says, "It takes an entire congregation" to mobilize for the influx of visitors and guests who join our services. Starting with Selichot on the Saturday night before Rosh Hashanah and continuing through to the break-fast after Yom Kippur, the period is filled with services, celebrations, and spiritual highs.

Kol Ami usually offers an Erev Rosh Hashanah service with apples and honey following, and services on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, both in the main sanctuary for adults and a children's service on the lower level. We experimented with Second Day Rosh Hashanah services at a private home for several years, but that was discontinued after Rabbi Richard passed away. However, at the tail end of the pandemic in 2022, Rabbi Gilah introduced a Tashlich Picnic, and that has become a now-annual tradition on the 1st or 2nd day of the holiday.

Yom Kippur begins with the exquisite music of the Kol Amites and the recital of Kol Nidre. In recent years, we've been graced with the singing of Jim North and Rachel Friendly, with a third rendition either by Emily Toll on cello (playing Bloch's Kol Nidre piece) or Jason Wright and Erin Bueno de Mesquita playing Kol Nidre on French horn from the balcony of the Sanctuary.

Each high holiday service is co-led by the rabbi and a lay leader from the congregation, which allows for multiple voices to be included. Most services also include multiple readers of English material, Torah readers, honors related to the Torah, and volunteers for every aspect of the service. Several volunteers coordinate the logistics for the High Holiday season (for the last five years: Mary Kuntz and Lance Feiner), in addition to coordinators for the Tashlich picnic and the generous Break-Fast at the end of Yom Kippur.

Since the pandemic, our services have been livestreamed so that people at home could watch. It's been customary to include small-group discussions on Yom Kippur morning sometimes led by our teens; to study the book of Jonah on Yom Kippur afternoon; and to invite everyone with a shofar to end the High Holidays with a blast at the conclusion of Neilah.

Holidays

Holiday services have evolved with the congregation. In addition to High Holiday services, our Hanukkah latkes-and-candlelighting party and Second Night Passover Seder have been very popular. The seder, led for many years by Herb Levy, then by Steve Pershing, and lately by Rabbi Bruce Aft, has often been open to the broader community, allowing interfaith dialogue.

Rabbi Gilah continued these traditions and with the help of a Family Holiday Committee chaired at different times by Emily Schwartz Greco and Jason Weiss, added new celebrations: Sukkot programs at members' homes, Tu B'Shvat Seders, Lag Ba'Omer bonfires, online Shavuot learning sessions, and Tisha B'Av gatherings to read Lamentations, both ancient and modern. Purim celebrations began as adult-oriented Jewish joke nights but evolved as well. A carnival for kids with crafts and games of chance was added, along with Purimspiels based on parodies of Fiddler on the Roof, Hamilton, My Fair Lady, and other musicals. Following the Purimspiel, for a number of years Rabbi Richard led the teens in reading the Book of Esther aloud, with everyone invited to attend.

B-Mitzvahs

The congregation's first B'nei Mitzvah celebration featured four adults who had not celebrated as teens, but who had begun learning Hebrew together as adults, taught by David Perlmutter. "We spent all this time studying Hebrew," recalls Cookie Perlmutter, saying, after about two years of study, "We might as well do a b'nei mitzvah and have a party."

Teen celebrations soon followed. Because of the congregation's small size, B-Mitzvahs can be tailored to the celebrant. Barbara Jazzo recalls her son being moved by the story of Jacob's ladder so much that he asked if he could delay his bar mitzvah until the appropriate week. No problem, Rabbi Leila assured him.

In 2023, Kol Ami adopted the term B-Mitzvah, so as to be inclusive of our non-binary and trans members. Our B-Mitzvah kids typically lead a great deal of the Shabbat morning service, including most of the prayers of the Shacharit morning liturgy, as well as reading Torah and leading the concluding prayers. They also offer a dvar Torah speech, interpreting their portion's meaning for today's world.

For a number of years, our B-Mitzvah kids would enjoy the privilege of selecting a melody for the closing hymn, Adon Olam, which Jason Wright would arrange for the Kol Amite musicians to play. Melodies ranged from Country Home to the theme from Rocky, with one Lady Gaga song as well!

6 Leadership

Rabbis

In 2000, the congregation hired Rabbi Leila Gal Berner as a part-time rabbi. Rabbi Leila had been ordained at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and had also earned a doctorate in medieval Jewish History at UCLA. She served until 2016, when she retired and took on the title of Rabbi Emerita.

In 2016, the congregation selected Rabbi Gilah Langner to succeed Rabbi Leila. Ordained in 2003, Rabbi Gilah had previously served in various roles at Kol Ami and at other congregations in the Washington area. She was also well known to Rabbi Leila, who had served on the Beit Din that ordained Rabbi Gilah, and who encouraged her to apply for the position. Rabbi Gilah has built on the traditions that Rabbi Leila started, calling the congregation "a place to practice kindness."

The congregation has also counted rabbis as congregants. Dr. Richard Ruth, who joined Kol Ami in 2003 and was a frequent service leader and longtime leader of its Talmud study for teens, was ordained in 2022. Rabbis Bruce Aft, Julie Gordon, and Adele Plotkin joined the congregation as members and assist in worship and study.

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The Kol Amite Musicians

While music has been part of the congregation's tradition from the start, in the early years it was somewhat patchy. Members recall contributions from Don Kraus's clarinet, Jim North's guitar, Leslie Lesner's voice, an awkward rendition of Kol Nidre on an upright bass, and various melodies played on a tape deck.

As more members joined, a pickup band evolved into the Kol Amites. By the early 2020s, the band was distinguished by the three French horns played by Jason Wright, Erin Bueno de Mesquita, and their son, Nate, all of whom would come in toward the end of the Kol Amites' signature setting of the Nava Tehila melody for "Oseh Shalom." As Jason told the Washington Jewish Week in 2022, "It's kind of our showpiece."

The Kol Amites combine professional musicians and music teachers, accomplished adult amateurs, and young members, some of whom have grown into accomplished adult musicians themselves. Amy Frost Baumgarten and Jonathan Baumgarten would play cello and flute alongside their daughter Sarah on ukelele or guitar. Tommy Greco would play

clarinet alongside his son Ray Greco on tenor saxophone and daughter Lucy Greco on clarinet. Some of our younger generation joined the Kol Amites when they reached high school, including Jerry Achtermann, Brita Hodges, Larry Schrag, and Michael Staren. Over time, the repertoire increased and a group of vocalists emerged, including Leslie Lesner, Robin Cook (also on drums), Rachel Friendly, and Naomi Attaway. Margie Jervis and Jim North on guitar, Emily Toll on cello, and Steve Pershing on violin rounded out the ensemble.

At one point, the Kol Amites reached close to 20 members, and a Junior Kol Amite band was formed for middle schoolers. The junior version could not be sustained through the pandemic but the main group continues to play at High Holidays, B-Mitzvahs, and occasional holidays. Jason Wright has arranged our liturgical music to fit our eclectic group of instrumentalists, and both Jason and Jim North provide musical direction.

Lay and guest leaders

From the founding, a great many services have been led not by ordained leaders, but rather by lay members. As noted above, each member brings favorite elements of Judaism to include. One of our notable members who served as service leader was Herb Levy, who also ran a folk music organization called Focus Music. For years Herb invited folk musicians who were in town for a concert to join him as musical guests at Shabbat services. By contrast, Mike Jawer, a veteran JCEP teacher, uses services as a chance to teach and learn. “I've enjoyed, perhaps above all, presenting a d'var Torah lesson when I've led a Kabbalat Shabbat service,” he reflects, “thereby facilitating an invigorating discussion where I gained from others' viewpoints.” More recently, Jim North and Rachel Friendly have been regularly leading services on their own, together, and alongside Rabbi Gilah. We are delighted to welcome Cantor George Henschel in our midst as a new member in 2025.

Kol Ami also enjoys bringing in a handful of guest clergy each year to supplement our rabbis and lay leaders. Guest clergy have included: Rabbi Mark Novak, Rabbi Diana Lynn, Caron Dale, Rabbi Jessica Shimberg, Hazzan Rebekka Goldsmith, Rabbi Ilan Glazer, Rabbi Sarah Tasman, and more.

Presidents

Kol Ami has relied heavily on the president of the congregation to work with the rabbi and coordinator, to chair the steering committee, and to guide the community through decisions, transitions, and change. Beginning with Don Kraus in 2000 and followed by others over the years, including Mary Kuntz, Rayna Aylward, Marcel Infeld, Lynda Erinoff, Debbie Linick, Jane Shulman, and David Friedman, Kol Ami has been fortunate in having a dedicated and hands-on series of presidents.

7 Education

Jewish Children's Education Program (JCEP)

Hope Warshaw, one of the founding members, recalled that "Jewish education is something that young parents look for." At the same time, many members did not want to replicate the twice-a-week Hebrew School they had grown up with. Nor did the congregation have the numbers or finances to pay a professional educator. Instead, early classes met in members' homes. Parents volunteered to teach, with an emphasis on fun and snacks.

The commitment and dedication of our lay teachers has been extraordinary.

JCEP teachers have included Shana Harbour, Zachary Schrag, Steve Pershing, Ruth Anne Faust, Andrew Keller, Mike Jawer, Eric Rosenberg, and others. The commitment and dedication of our lay teachers has been extraordinary. Then, for the first time, in 2024-25 Kol Ami needed to hire two outside teachers, and was fortunate to find Rabbi Mordechai Cohen and Yocheved Cohen to step in. JCEP has been organized and run by a series of dedicated coordinators, including Mindy Rudell, Shana Harbour, John Staren, and Rachel Fleishman. Over the last couple of years, Rachel and John have developed parent social hours at the same time as JCEP, and brought in Ari Jacobson to lead music/prayer enrichment each month.

Although our students are not required or pressured to have a B-Mitzvah, many of them have chosen to do so. In recent years, Rabbi Julie Gordon has taken over tutoring our kids for their service; they also work with Rabbi Gilah to prepare a d'var Torah. When there is a cohort of B-Mitzvah kids in a particular year, Rabbi Gilah meets with the students and their parents as part of a B-Mitzvah shmooze to explore ethical and relationship issues.

Teens

For many years prior to his death, Rabbi Richard led a weekly Pizza and Talmud group for teens. While other congregations sometimes struggle to keep post-B-Mitzvah teens involved, Rabbi Richard attracted them like honey. "What he did with the teenagers was miraculous," Rabbi Leila recalls. "I know of no other congregation where the kids not only loved to study, but were so impacted by a teacher."

Adult education

A key focus of adult education efforts has been on developing the skills and knowledge of our members to participate in services and to lead worship services themselves. Some of that education has taken place in the context of group Adult B'nai Mitzvah celebrations,

under both Rabbi Leila's and then Rabbi Gilah's guidance. As Rabbi Leila notes, preparing to lead services takes a lot of study, especially for members who did not have extensive Jewish education early in life. "I've seen people at Kol Ami who started out with little or no Jewish education, and have become quite educated," she remarks.

Another arena where members have gained skills and confidence leading services is the four-day-a-week morning minyan on Zoom. Lay leaders are encouraged, coached, and given the opportunity to lead portions of the service and then the full service itself.

Other Adult Education initiatives have been wide-ranging over the years, including adult Talmud classes led by Mark Weisenbloom and then Richard Ruth; Hebrew language coaching; learning to leyn Torah with Mike Jawer, a multi-year effort to read through the entire Tanakh led by Marcel Infeld; weekly Torah study lunchtime sessions with Rabbi Bruce Aft; a Rosh Chodesh initiative started by Susan Freiband; and a "Kitchen Sink" series that brings in outside speakers and contemporary topics each year. In 2023-24, Kol Ami won a grant from the Sinai and Synapses program to hold four lectures on Science and Judaism. Speakers included our own members Betsy von Holle, Mike Jawer, and Jeremy Epstein as well as outside experts.

For several years, Rabbi Gilah and Rabbi Richard offered a series of Sunday morning classes, entitled Encountering Judaism and Living Jewish. These classes were available to both members of Kol Ami and visitors interested in conversion. At the end of the two years, seven of the class attendees converted to Judaism and were celebrated at services in the congregation. In the last several years, new initiatives have been started on behalf of our older members, including a Creative Aging group that organizes outings and art projects, and a Wise Aging group led by Barbara and David Diskin. A "Positive Aging" blog was developed and posted for several years by our members Susan Freiband and Harriet Epstein.

8 The future

Kol Ami began, in 2000, as a series of questions. Can our community grow and thrive? Who would join? Who would lead? Where would we meet? What should we be called? And how will we define ourselves? Twenty-five years later, we have answered all of those questions, but only tentatively. In the Jewish tradition, we will continue to ask and argue, to discuss and debate, and to teach and to learn. We will do so with many voices, the voices that together make up the voice of our people, Kol Ami.