

Adding preschool to the mix in version 3.0

Institute of Southern Jewish Life expands curriculum for small Southern congregations

School may be out for the summer, but on June 19, the lessons were just beginning.

Religious school administrators and teachers from about two dozen congregations in the Deep South congregated at Golden Moon Resort in Philadelphia, Miss., for the third annual "Go and Teach" educator's conference for the Institute of Southern Jewish Life.

Returning congregations brought their copies of last year's curriculum, developed by the Institute, and received a large box containing "version 3.0," for use in the coming year.

The Jackson-based Institute developed the curriculum during the summer of 2003, with educators from across the country. The goal is to have a curriculum that is easy for untrained volunteers to teach, and that can provide students in schools from five students to hundreds of students a standardized base of knowledge

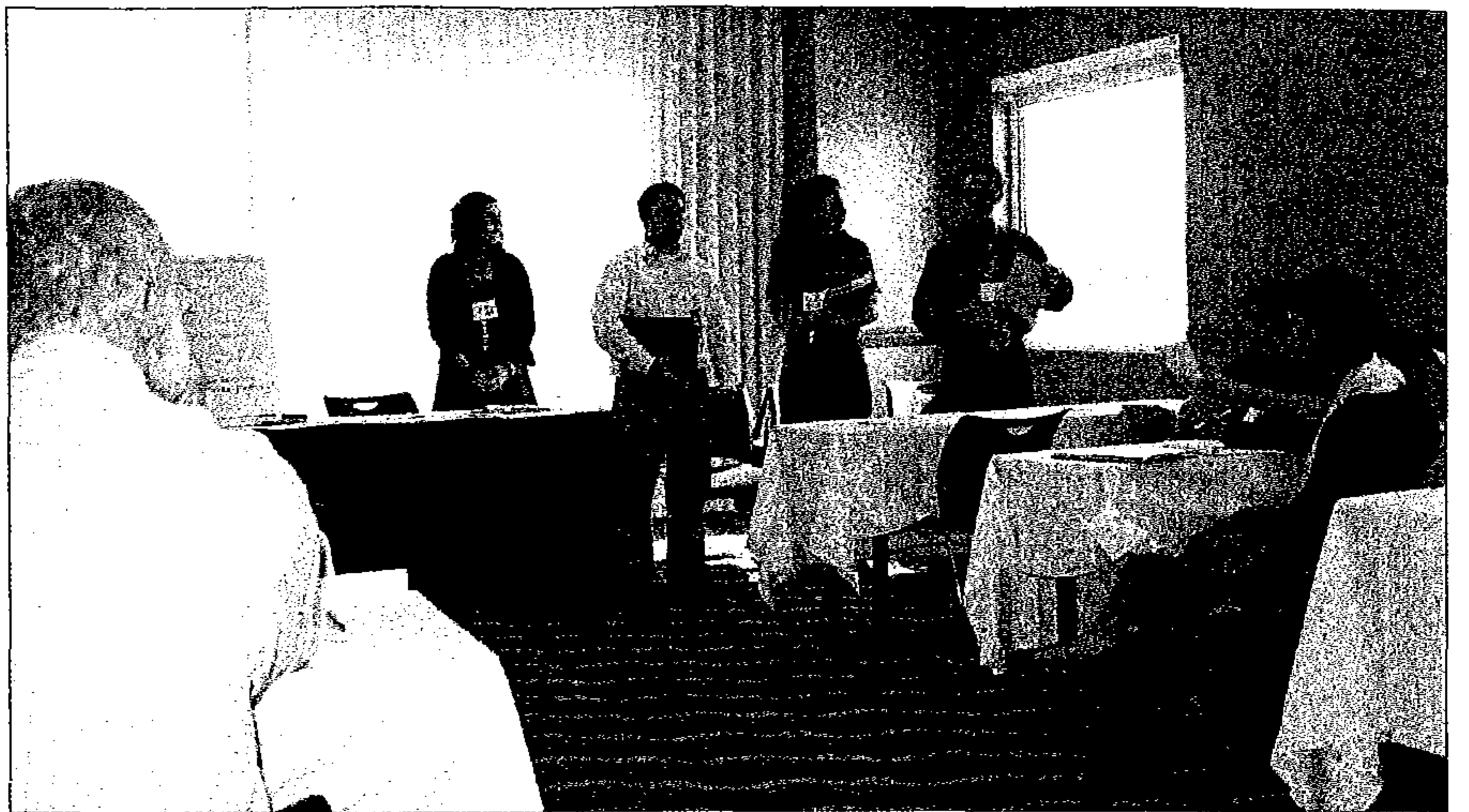
that builds upon itself in successive years.

Ten congregations started with the program in 2003, from Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. Additional congregations joined the pioneers last year, expanding the reach to Arkansas, Pensacola, Fla., and communities in Texas and Georgia. This year, about 26 congregations will use the curriculum.

Cynthia Kristan-Graham of Auburn's Beth Shalom said the curriculum "worked really well" for the small congregation.

Gary Hall of Huntsville's Etz Chayim said the last two years have "really improved our religious school, like a breath of fresh air getting everything focused."

The Huntsville congregations have a combined school. Pam Rhodes said she worked with the Confirmation students, and found the curriculum to be beneficial. The Confirmation ceremony was held



The Institute's four new Fellows speak to first-time congregations at the educator's conference in Philadelphia on June 19

a few weeks ago, and "we were told by many people it was the most wonderful Confirmation they had ever seen."

She noted that the teens are "coming back and helping with religious school, and staying active in the community."

One issue the Institute has concentrated on is how schools can catch up on a year if they fall behind. That was a particular issue for Temple Beth El in Pensacola, which lost five

weeks following Hurricane Ivan last fall, Wendi Ochs said "we were able to come back, make adjustments and move right back into it."

Toshja Brown of Mobile's Ahavas Chesed also praised the curriculum's flexibility, "The way we've been able to add to it and mold it to our needs in Mobile, because our religious school does not meet every week."

As part of the conference,

congregations submitted schedule requests for weekend visits by the Fellows. As she considered the schedule, Kristan-Graham held the Auburn football schedule in one hand. She agreed that it was unlikely any Alabama congregation would request a visit the weekend of the Iron Bowl.

Each congregation receives two weekend visits by a Fellow

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that is assigned to that community.

Brown noted, "It'll be interesting to see the follow-up now that we have more Fellows."

For the last two years, Amanda Abrams and Beth Kander have served as the Institute's Fellows. This year, Institute Director Macy Hart said, there are four Fellows, reflecting the expanded program.

Russel Neiss recently graduated from the City University of New York's Honors College. A native New Yorker, he studied Yiddish and was president of the CUNY Honors College Student Association.

Debbie Ovadia started with the Institute in February. Her parents were born in Egypt, but she is from southern California, graduating from the University of California-Irvine. Meredith Reich is also from California, a graduate of the University of California-Santa Barbara.

Greg Weisman is from the Chicago area, and recently graduated from Boston University. He has an extensive summer camping background and was vice president of the Interfraternity Council.

The first two Fellows are departing the Institute after their two-year terms. Abrams, who grew up in Brookhaven, is entering a dual Master's program at Hebrew Union College and the University of Southern California, where she will study both Jewish communal service and business administration.

Kander will attend the University of Michigan's School of Social Work.

Many in attendance praised the accessibility of the Institute's educators, stating that they benefit by having a source of expertise to call upon for advice, rather than just having a stack of books to draw from.

Hart said the curriculum has continued to evolve based on feedback from congregations during implementation. At first, there were no plans to develop a pre-school curriculum, but congregational demand prompted its introduction at this conference.

The pre-school element was developed with the staff of the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education.

Hart noted how the Institute has been partnering with large national educational organizations, and the conference has become an important destination on the Jewish educational map.

One of the keynote addresses was by William Rubin, executive director of the Community Foundation for Jewish Education of Metropolitan Chicago. The keynote was about how to teach about Israel, and Hart noted that it "will probably become one of the major new ways to teach about Israel."

Another keynote speaker was Leora Schafer, education program specialist in the national office of Facing History and Ourselves. The organization has

a Memphis office, and held a workshop attended by both Fellows and a representative from Florence's Temple B'nai Israel. The Institute's Holocaust curriculum includes elements from Facing History. Schafer said the lessons "asks students to ask big questions" in applying universal ideals. "It is a course that is very reflective."

There was also an observer from the Jewish Education Service of North America at the conference.