

Reconstructionist rabbinical school first to allow students with non-Jewish partners

by [Lauren Markoe](#)

October 1, 2015

c. 2015 Religion News Service

(RNS) The rabbinical college of the Reconstructionist stream of Judaism has revoked its “non-Jewish partner” policy, becoming the first major Jewish movement to welcome seminary students who are in committed relationships with non-Jews.

“Today’s announcement is a decision by our faculty about what should or should not hold someone back from becoming a rabbi,” said Reconstructionist Rabbinical College president Deborah Waxman, of last week’s faculty vote, which was announced Wednesday (September 30).

“Our deliberations, heavily influenced through consultation with alumni, congregations, and students, have simultaneously led us to reaffirm that all rabbinical candidates must model commitment to Judaism in their communal, personal and family lives,” Waxman said. “We witness Jews with non-Jewish partners demonstrating these commitments every day in many Jewish communities.”

Reconstructionism, the smallest of the major movements in American Judaism—after the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox—includes about 100 affiliated synagogues in North America. But it has long taken a leading role in changing Jewish minds on cultural issues, particularly those involving women and gays. Based in Wyncote, Pennsylvania, outside Philadelphia, Reconstructionists were the first to celebrate girls’ bat mitzvahs, a coming-of-age ceremonies previously reserved for boys.

The debate over the “non-Jewish partners” policy within the school, also in Wyncote, began more than two years ago and included discussions of Jewish law, studies of Jewish demographic trends and consultations with Reconstructionist rabbis. The faculty’s vote to change the school’s policy—Waxman would not reveal the actual number who approved and disapproved of the change—affects both incoming students and those already enrolled in the school.

The revoked policy had stated: “The RRC does not ordinarily admit or graduate as a rabbi a student married to, or in a committed relationship with, a non-Jew.”

Though the school graduates, on average, eight to ten students a year, and the policy change may affect few personally, it is based in principle, Waxman said, and should inform the debate on Jews and interfaith relationships beyond the college.

The subject of intermarriage is particularly touchy within the Jewish community, given that one-third of the world’s Jewish population—now around 14 million—was lost in the Holocaust and because intermarriage for American Jews now approaches 60 percent. Studies, including the Pew Research Center’s 2013 Portrait of American Jews, show that, as a group, children of intermarried couples are far more likely to shed their Jewish identities compared with the offspring of couples where both partners are Jewish.

The debate over intermarriage extends to the Reform movement—which accounts for about 35 percent of U.S. Jews—and where it is up to an individual rabbi to decide whether to officiate at the marriage of an interfaith couple. Conservative rabbis are prohibited from officiating at interfaith marriages, though a few have said they would like to. Neither Reform nor Conservative seminaries allow their students to be in committed relationships with non-Jews. Orthodox Judaism prohibits interfaith marriage.

Mychal Copeland, a rabbi who graduated from RRC in 2000, is now married to a Jewish woman with whom she was in a serious relationship when she was in rabbinical school. Copeland wishes her spouse could have converted without RRC’s old “no Jewish partners” policy forcing the issue.

She is glad for its revocation.

“RRC’s policy change recognizes that leaders who are part of religiously diverse families could be the best models for other interfaith families exploring Jewish life,” said Copeland, who heads InterfaithFamily/Bay Area, which helps deepen Jewish practice within families where one partner is not Jewish. “A rabbi’s choice of partner does not reflect that leader’s religious life or commitment to Judaism. . . . Welcoming such rabbis sends a message to the large numbers of Jews partnered with people of different backgrounds that they, too, can lead rich and meaningful Jewish lives without feeling like second-class citizens.”

Waxman said: "The issue of Jews intermarrying is no longer something we want to police; we want to welcome Jews and the people who love us to join us in the very difficult project of bringing meaning, justice and hope into our world."