

Conservative synagogues can now officially accept non-Jews as members

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [April 12, 2017](#) issue

Although some Conservative synagogues have already welcomed non-Jews as members, the body that governs America's second-largest stream of Judaism has now officially sanctioned the practice.

The 94-8 vote of the general assembly of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the umbrella group for the movement, allows individual congregations to decide whether they will extend membership to non-Jews.

"The Rabbinical Assembly believes in the idea that synagogue life should be open to those who wish to be part of the Jewish community, and we are enriched by their presence," said Stewart Vogel, treasurer of the association of Conservative rabbis. "We encourage a spirit of welcoming that can strengthen the connections of all."

Vogel is also vice chair of USCJ's Commission on Community and Covenant, which convened last year to consider ways to engage interfaith couples.

The March 1 vote comes at a time when the U.S. intermarriage rate for Jews hovers around 60 percent.

Though the movement had previously extended official membership only to Jews, non-Jews were still considered members in some Conservative synagogues through family memberships that included all people in a household, Jewish and non-Jewish.

The Conservative movement sits between Reform, the largest stream of Judaism in the United States, with its less-strict interpretation of Jewish law, and various branches of Orthodox Judaism, the smallest and most traditional.

There is pressure within the USCJ to be yet more welcoming to interfaith couples and to allow its clergy to preside at interfaith weddings, an option open to Reform clergy.

A 2013 Pew Research Center study showed that 18 percent of American Jews identify with the Conservative movement. —Religion News Service