



A Shared Vision

CANTOR JESSICA ROSKIN and **PASTOR SARAH SHELTON** both have bold visions of tearing down walls in Birmingham. And no wonder — they've already shattered some ceilings

BY LYNN GROOM



very weekend in downtown Birmingham, two women stand before separate congregations, one inspiring the hundreds assembled before her through music, the other through the spoken word. But Jessica Roskin, cantor at Temple Emanu-El, and Sarah Shelton, pastor at Baptist Church of the Covenant, have more in common than being female clergy in what some would consider traditionally male roles. They share a vision for extending hospitality across economic, religious and cultural boundaries within the city.

The importance of extending hospitality across traditional lines goes back decades for both congregations — and has sobering roots.

In 1970, Winifred Bryant, an African American, walked forward with her young daughter to join an all-white Baptist church in Birmingham. They were denied membership because of their race. The congregation roiled, and the incident made national news. About 300 of the church's members walked out to form what would become Baptist Church of the Covenant, where Ms. Bryant — and anyone else who shared her faith — was welcome.

Upon hearing that the fledgling group of 300 needed a place to meet, Temple Emanu-El's then-rabbi, Milton Grafman, graciously told them that he knew of a perfectly good sanctuary that was not in use on Sundays — his own. The generous offer proved a stroke of civic genius for the rabbi and civil rights advocate, engendering an openness in the growing new congregation. "As a consequence of the Temple's hospitality, our church has always been open to be in fellowship with other denominations," Sarah says.

Since those days, both congregations have joined with others (including a local mosque) to form Southside Faith Community, which meets every other month to talk about needs within the community, and for friendship — which is where Jessica and Sarah met.

The group's influence goes well beyond bi-monthly camaraderie. Within hours of the 9/11 tragedy, their combined congregations were assembled for a show of unity in an interfaith service. Each year, the group also hosts a collective Thanksgiving service, where

the host congregation (which rotates each year) offers readings from the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Koran. When it was Temple Emanu-El's turn to host, Jessica led the assembled choir, "It was wonderfully overwhelming," she says. "To lead all those people in music gives you a sense of hope. We are different, but those are good differences. All of us believe at least some of the same things. To all be together holds deep meaning for me."

Sarah concurs. "Anytime we begin to see similarities between people, we begin to remove barriers. Hearing one faith tradition helps me compare it with my own. It builds a bridge of respect and often makes my own faith richer."

Living out their faith by entering into the clergy was a natural choice for both Sarah and Jessica. "Judaism and music were my loves," Jessica says. But until her sophomore year, she didn't know that the cantorate was open to women. When she heard of the first female cantor in South Florida, she made an appointment to speak with her. "But I knew it was perfect for me before I met with her." When she came to Birmingham to visit Temple Emanu-El about their open cantorate, "I fell in love with the people." A cantor's role is similar to that of a rabbi — Roskin officiates funerals and weddings, visits hospitals and teaches about Judaism. But during worship, the rabbi is the expert on the text of the Torah, and the cantor is the expert on the liturgy, which she interprets through music.

Jessica hopes she reaches the congregation she loves. "When everything's gone wrong in their week, I try to bring them to a place where they can let that go and pray to God."

Sarah also grew up in a rich faith tradition, with a pastor father who was deeply respected in the Birmingham Baptist community. "My closest friends were my friends at church. It was my place of belonging." But the summer before her freshman year in college, she had an "uneasy" feeling she couldn't shake. "I remember praying that I would do anything, even commit my life to full-time Christian vocation, if God would just remove that feeling. It was removed immediately and has never returned."

Later, as an adult with two seminary degrees, she was bewildered to find that some Baptists did not want her to serve in ministry because she was a woman. Indeed, Sarah is one of an

elite number of female senior pastors in the Southern Baptist Convention — a fact that earned her a profile in *Time* in 2002.

"Thankfully, there have been wonderful places that were willing to take a risk on me, and I think have benefited from my role as a minister."

Today, each woman is certain of her faith without being condescending. They have something in common to promote — meeting Birmingham's significant needs. "We're always stronger when we can work together to better our community," Jessica says. And Sarah, whose church is strategically located near SouthTown on University Boulevard, notes, "We are very aware of the needs in our neighborhood," where the hungry or homeless often wander in to the sanctuary to seek help.

Both congregations are reaching out to meet those needs. In a show of tolerance as much as generosity, many of Temple Emanu-El's families have adopted impoverished Christian families through the RUSH Initiative and provided all of their Christmas gifts for the year — often going beyond the necessities for the children, providing luxuries such as televisions and iPods. Jessica is proud of her congregation's outreach. "They have never thought of just themselves." Likewise, Covenant's Sunday School classes adopt families around the holidays. Sarah's own family is adopting a family from the 1917 Clinic, which serves families living with HIV, to "provide Santa." The congregation also makes sack lunches for the homeless each week year-round and finds ways to intermingle with their neighbors living in public housing.

In looking ahead to 2009, Sarah has a targeted view. "We've entered into a two-year urban research project, re-thinking the use of our facilities to provide ministry specifically to our neighborhood," Sarah says. "If our congregation can bring change to one life, all of our effort is worth it."

Jessica is also looking ahead to 2009. "My hope is that we can continue to work for the greater community. We're always stronger if we can all work together."

To learn how to join Jessica Roskin's or Sarah Shelton's congregations in helping people this season, visit www.1917clinic.org, www.birminghamhospitalitynetwork.com or www.rushinitiative.org.