

## **A Working Definition of Jewish Identity**

(Delegates, July 27, 2010)

*NOTE: These criteria guide our evaluation of congregations for UMJC membership and are not to be taken as a final statement on Jewish identity. Nothing in this statement is intended to preclude further discussion and action on this issue.*

Jewish identity is best understood as neither a strictly religious category nor a strictly ethnic category, but as membership in a people. Such a definition seems to underlie Paul's language in Philippians 3:4-5: "If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews..."

The primary criterion for defining Jewish identity is Jewish birth. Traditional Judaism recognizes one born of a Jewish mother as Jewish. Based on biblical precedent and reflecting the practice of some elements of the wider Jewish community, we also would consider one born of a Jewish father and a Gentile mother to be Jewish, if he or she identifies as a Jew.

Since Jewish identity is not strictly ethnic, however, the discovery of Jewish ancestry beyond ones grandparents does not in itself render one Jewish. One who discovers Jewish ancestry and feels drawn to identify with the Jewish people should be encouraged to learn and grow in awareness and practice. He or she may be an appropriate and active member of a Messianic Jewish congregation, but would not help meet the UMJC minimum requirement of ten Jewish family units. Cases of conversion as well as ambiguous Jewish identity should be brought to the attention of the UMJC interviewers, i.e. the Regional Director and Executive representative, and would not help meet membership requirements apart from a ruling by the UMJC Executive Committee.