

From Bogota to South Georgia

Rabbi Dana Kaplan has officiated at simchas around the world

By Ann Marie Quill

These days Rabbi Dana Kaplan calls the Southwest Georgia town of Albany — and the Reform Congregation B'nai Israel — his home.

But that wasn't always the case.

The Manhattan native studied at the Hebrew Union College/Jewish Institute of Religion in Jerusalem and completed his entire rabbinic program in Israel.

A love of travel spurred him to trek across the globe writing about his experiences in articles on Cuban and South African Judaism and performing weddings.

He says the people who ask him to perform their weddings find him by referral because they know he is willing to travel, and he is listed on a Web site of rabbis who perform interfaith marriages, though he says he's careful when doing so.

Kaplan considers officiating at interfaith ceremonies a form of outreach and says couples must meet certain stipulations for him to agree to perform the service.

"If I feel a couple is serious about investigating Judaism, I'll agree to do it," he says.

Kaplan says a few weddings that stand out in his mind include one he performed in Bogota, Colombia.

"The bride was from Colombia; the groom was from Chicago," he says. That ceremony was performed in English, Spanish and Hebrew.



Rabbi Dana Kaplan is the spiritual leader of the Reform Congregation B'nai Israel in Albany.

Another was a wedding in St. Lucia.

"They were just an ordinary American Jewish couple. They met on Match.com, and both just happened to be Jewish," Kaplan says. "They were not necessarily looking for a rabbi. They went down to see a justice of the peace, but he had a big cross and was missing a few fingers. So they decided to find a rabbi."

Kaplan doesn't perform as many faraway weddings now

since he's the Albany congregation's full-time rabbi. What started as an invitation to perform High Holiday services there turned into a permanent position five years ago.

"I missed the pulpit," says Kaplan, who at the time was teaching at the University of Missouri in Kansas City.

He says his congregation is composed of about 100 families.

"We're doing pretty well. It's a vibrant, lively and warm congregation," he says. "More people are moving to the Albany area. We have applications for three new members now. We have two bar mitzvahs and two confirmants scheduled this coming year."

Kaplan has also officiated at weddings in Albany.

"I performed a local wedding several weeks ago. It was the son of a local family who has been part of the temple for several generations," he says. The son married a non-Jewish woman, but she may convert and is taking an introductory Judaism class that Kaplan offers.

"I performed the wedding in the temple. There was a chuppah; it was a completely Jewish service. I'm hoping to bring them into the congregation," he says.

Kaplan has authored a number of books, his latest being *The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism*, a collection of essays by leading scholars on the religious Jewish experience. ■



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