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Hugh Taft-Morales To Be Installed As (Clergy) Leader of Philadelphia Ethical Society Apr 15
Hugh Taft-Morales Has Big Vision for Small Congregation

The 127-year-old Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia on Rittenhouse Square will formally install Hugh Taft-Morales, 54, as 8th Leader of the Society, in an April 15 ceremony – the first of its kind for the Philadelphia humanist congregation that became the third Society to join Felix Adler’s nascent Ethical Culture religion in 1885.

Since he arrived last July, Taft-Morales has wasted no time in moving his new Society forward out into the public square. Only weeks after his arrival, he piggy-backed on to the Rittenhouse Square arts festival, strumming his guitar and offering free lemonade along with an invitation to ask about Ethical Humanism. Several days later he opened the Society’s doors to Peace activists with a sing-along in front of the Society building.

Then in November he joined the Occupy Philly Interfaith tent outside City Hall where he was one of four invited to an intimate lunch with Jesse Jackson. Subsequently, the Society has offered meeting space (and support) for Occupy’s General Assembly and Interfaith meetings.

In December he led Society efforts to host the Freethought Society’s controversial Tree of Knowledge (evicted from its previous Chesco location) and later to co-sponsor Lawrence Krauss’ lecture, “A Universe of Nothing,” that attracted an audience that overflowed into the foyer and up the stairs.

Recognition of Martin Luther King Day provided Taft-Morales an opportunity to honor King through linking his address on the memory and legacy of the 1963 Birmingham Alabama Children’s Crusade with heightened awareness of and support for the essential work of the Southern Poverty Law Center described the following Sunday by guest speaker Marsha Levick. In linking his Sunday addresses directly to social action projects, Taft-Morales, in the words of Kate Esposito, Ethical Action Committee Chair, “walks the talk, for him the creed is the deed. He has supported the Committee’s work of taking stands on national issues like the Occupy Movement. Without ethical action, why bother with the humanist philosophy if it’s a dormant one?” As well as being a “terrific spirit for social action projects, he’s a fun, creative guy who brings positive energy that people like being around.”

A quality he demonstrated when he donned a gorilla suit for the Society’s Darwin Day celebration, and led followers out on to Rittenhouse Square to sing “The First DNA,” to the tune of “The First Noel,” after which he connected in a simian manner with other occupants of the Square. All this he has accomplished on top of regular responsibilities for delivering inspiring

addresses, developing educational programs, attending and facilitating numerous meetings, and being responsive to pastoral concerns.

Taft-Morales' accomplishments are all the more remarkable for someone who serves as a part-time leader and commutes from Takoma Park, Md. As Board member Betsy Lightbourn observed, "Although he is at his office at the Society approximately ten days per month, it seems like he spends more time here because he always seems to be accessible, if not in person then through his ubiquitous virtual online presence."

When Taft-Morales entered leadership training (equivalent to seminary training) in 2006 after a 25-year teaching career in Washington DC independent schools, he was well aware that the average Ethical Society was small, and supported only part-time leadership. Taft-Morales also serves as part-time leader of the Baltimore Ethical Society. "When I decided to become an Ethical Culture leader I was captivated by Ethical Culture's unique overlap of ideas and action – ideas that inspire action and that matter. We are a community that can house that combination. To us it is more important to make a difference in the world than to form a big club."

According to recent research on congregational development, many people (there are more small congregations than large) desire smallness because they value authenticity– the chance to know the clergy person and fellow members better. Because smaller congregations are more nimble, they can embrace change more readily. And finally, some younger people value inter-generational experience – bringing generations together rather than developing age specific activities.

Since its founding in 1885, the Philadelphia Ethical Society has ranged from under 50 to its high of 600 members reported in 1915 with a Sunday attendance at the Academy of Music for lectures by prominent thinkers such as William James, Walt Whitman and Julian Huxley that averaged 1200. Today membership is in the 60s but with swelling numbers who attend programs and collaborate in social justice actions.

In one of his first actions as Leader, Taft-Morales opened the middle door of the auditorium on Sunday mornings, issuing a standing invitation to come inside.

