The Importance of Professional Leadership

By Hugh Taft-Morales

For as long as any of you has been part of this Ethical Society, you have been served by a professional Leader. People like myself, Richard Kiniry before me, and Judith Eckerson before Richard, are trained and certified as Clergy Leaders by the American Ethical Union. You may not be aware that other Societies practice alternative models of leadership.

Last month, I participated in a panel discussion about the importance of professional leadership in Ethical Culture. The other panelists were Nori Rost, Leader of the New York Society for Ethical Culture; and KC Slack, Leader of the Washington Ethical Society. It was the last of three discussions exploring approaches to organizing Ethical Societies.

It won't surprise you that Nori, KC, and I all emphasized the importance of professional Leaders. We have, after all, dedicated our professional lives to nurturing humanist communities. Societies like Philadelphia and Baltimore, for the present, remain committed to this model of leadership.

Each Society, however, is unique, with its own distinct resources and culture. Each must chart its own path. Over time, we all must reassess our chosen models. For example, the services provided by professional Leaders *could* be offered by a lay leader team. In an earlier panel, Jill Aul described the impressive community organized through volunteers at the Ethical Society Mid Rivers.

I am concerned, though, that without trained clergy, some elements of congregational life could atrophy. Ethical Societies

are generally small; so, most Leaders are jacks-of-all-trades. I play the roles of teacher, preacher, pastoral counselor, ethical action activist, social-time host, organizational consultant, program administrator, custodian of Ethical Culture philosophy, and Ethical Culture ambassador to society.

Teaching and preaching are the core of my work: how I guide members toward thinking and acting in ways that reflect Ethical Culture values. Sometimes, they are part of my pastoral counseling. Mostly, they come through my two monthly Sunday-morning presentations, as well as classes and book discussions.

My most recent ethical-action engagements have been with Peace Day Philly, POWER, and Trinity Church's Open Heart Café and Clothing Closet. I also offer organizational support to the Philadelphia Society Board and committees, attending meetings and consulting with chairs.

My pastoral work is usually informal but pretty constant. It may take the form of words shared in passing or of longer conversations in my office or over the phone. I support people going through life-stage transitions, often incorporating ritual or meditation.

Frequently, I help people process the challenges of working with others. Tensions arise when opinions differ about the purpose and priorities of Ethical Culture. Almost always, miscommunication is involved. Feelings get hurt. Despite our earnest efforts to live meaningful, ethical lives, we are limited and flawed creatures. I hope that I nurture patience and resilience in our shared dedication.

I participate on the national level, as well. In the National Leaders Council, I serve as secretary, lead one task force, and am a member of another. I am part of the American Ethical Union's Education Team. Half of this denominational work I consider part of my contractual obligation to Philadelphia and Baltimore. Half I think of as volunteering.

Can alternative leadership arrangements fulfill all those functions? I honestly don't know. Models based on shared leadership might make available more person-hours and energy. But members would not be served as well if some of what I offer now fell by the wayside.

I dearly hope all Ethical Societies think long and hard about the role of professional Leadership. Ethical Culture is important for those seeking lives that are more than purely secular but also independent of theism. Professional Leaders play a vital role in nurturing ethical spirit and supporting community, so that we can better help heal this broken world.