



# American Humanist Association

## Strategic Plan – 2007

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of the American Humanist Association (AHA) is to advance and disseminate knowledge of Humanism and promote Humanism as an important and helpful influence in people's personal and civic lives. The AHA's vision is for a global community of peace and progress governed by reason, compassion, and tolerance.

The AHA seeks to increase public awareness and acceptance of Humanism, to demonstrate the validity and relevance of Humanist ideas, and advance original scholarship. The AHA also works to unite the millions of Humanists in America, many of whom do not currently identify as Humanists, and to encourage cooperation with other organizations supporting common causes.

Individually and united, Humanists in the AHA are staunch advocates for secular government, civil liberties, social justice, a robust public education system, a compassionate approach to the use of science and technology, and a foreign policy centered on universal human rights, democratic values, and the goal of a world at peace.

### Programs and Priorities:

The AHA provides organization, staffing, services, publications, and infrastructure to support its programs and activities. Its priorities for the next five years are to:

- Improve the standing and awareness of Humanism through a vigorous advertising and public awareness campaign [A1], and public advocacy and lobbying for Humanist positions on topical issues [A2].
- Strengthen the AHA by improving the ways AHA chapters are supported [B1]; expanding the AHA membership base [B2]; and cooperating with like-minded organizations [B3].
- Develop Scholarship and Research through increased ties with the wider academic community, while developing original papers on topical issues, such that the AHA becomes a recognized resource on policy [C].

The strategic goal of the AHA for the next five years is to grow the membership and raise the awareness and capital needed to accelerate its larger vision and purpose. The AHA's current membership is 7,800 and its annual operating budget is one million dollars. Doubling both these figures during the five-year period of 2007 through 2011 will verify that the AHA is on the correct course. Although a significant portion of the AHA's income is generated from annual dues and subscriptions to publications, growth must be financed through increased support from major donors and foundations.

## **Introduction**

The purpose of the American Humanist Association (AHA) is to advance and disseminate knowledge of Humanism and promote Humanism as an important and helpful influence in people's personal and civic lives.

Humanists strive for a world where the values of reason, compassion, and tolerance are widely accepted as the basis for a global community of peace and progress. While it is essential that these ends be sought through international cooperation, the United States of America, by virtue of its substantial wealth and power, belongs at the forefront of any such effort. Therefore, the American Humanist Association seeks to advance this vision of global harmony by fostering a profound change in American culture whereby Humanist values grow in prominence while the influence of regressive religious conservatism diminishes.

The AHA will accomplish these goals by working to increase public awareness and acceptance of Humanism, to demonstrate the application of Humanist ideas, and to advance original scholarship. The AHA will also work to unite the millions of Humanists in the United States, many of whom do not openly identify as Humanists, and to encourage cooperation with like-minded organizations supporting common causes.

Individually and united, Humanists in the AHA will be staunch advocates for secular government, civil liberties, social justice, a robust public education system, a compassionate approach to the use of science and technology, and a foreign policy centered on universal human rights, democratic values, and a world at peace.

These are ambitious goals but the AHA has significant assets. As this nation's oldest democratically structured Humanist organization, it has established credibility and legitimacy. Its location in the nation's capital positions it to play a central role in coalition building, both with nontheistic organizations, and other progressive groups also headquartered in Washington DC.

More generally, the climate of opinion in the United States favors such changes. The 2006 midterm election showed widespread disenchantment with a national leadership that has become demonstrably beholden to right-wing religious extremists. A solid majority of Americans now believe that major course corrections are needed. The AHA is well suited to influence the paths those course corrections will take through its various programs, including advocacy, movement building, and academic research.

Much will depend on the AHA's ability to secure adequate funding. A significant portion of the AHA's income is generated from annual dues and subscriptions to publications, but most funds come from other sources. The AHA's ability to finance the targeted growth will depend, therefore, on its ability to raise funds from major donors and through foundation grants.

## Strategy for Growth

If the AHA is to become a more effective agent of change, who has to be reached?

1. The American public as a whole must first be reached. The AHA seeks to influence public opinion so that it will regard Humanism more favorably as a way of life, appreciating its positive values and shedding negative stereotypes.
2. Second, outreach is needed to those individuals who have not “come out” as Humanists but who can be persuaded to do so. The AHA is interested in recruiting as many such individuals as possible, particularly those with a high profile, to sign on as AHA members.
3. Third, outreach is needed to those people who already consider themselves Humanists, including both those who belong to the AHA’s chapters and affiliates and those who have joined the AHA but have not become members of a local group. In each case they need the support that will strengthen their commitment and help them to convince others.

There is an intentional synergy among the selected program areas below, a crossover of benefits between the AHA’s several programs, which mandates against excessive compartmentalization. Staff should be prepared to adjust emphasis and timing to developments as they occur. This is particularly true of certain major program areas, notably publications that are directly involved in supporting efforts to impact all three of the following targets. With this caveat in mind, the following areas for stepped-up efforts during the next five years are identified:

- A) **Increase Public Awareness** through dramatically expanded efforts to raise the profile of Humanism and the AHA through: (1) mass media, advertising, and public relations; (2) public advocacy of Humanist positions and lobbying.
- B) **Strengthen the AHA** through 1) a phased program that explores new ways of connecting to the AHA’s chapters and affiliates while strengthening existing ties; 2) expanding the AHA’s membership base; and 3) coalition building aimed at closer cooperation with nontheistic organizations, plus increased cooperation on specific issues with organizations outside the nontheistic community.
- C) **Develop Scholarship and Research** through increased ties with the wider academic community, while developing original papers on topical issues, such that the AHA becomes a recognized resource on policy.

To achieve the vision and purpose of the AHA, the strategic goal for the next five years is to grow the AHA’s membership and raise the awareness and capital needed to accelerate the larger vision and purpose of the AHA. As the five-year period progresses, appraisals of progress toward meeting these goals will necessarily be somewhat subjective and descriptive rather than always measurable in numbers. However, two specific indices, membership and annual budget, can serve as measures of how closely the AHA is living up to its board’s hopes and expectations.

1. The number of members of the national organization can be expected to increase as the efforts described above take effect. The target for membership growth is to double the present number of 7800 so that by the end of 2011 it will approximate 16,000.

2. With all the clever planning and astute leadership in the world, what can be accomplished is ultimately limited by available funds. The AHA's present annual budget is approximately \$1 million and the target for 2011 is to double that figure to \$2 million.

## **Program Area**

### **A. Increase public awareness and acceptance of Humanism**

#### **1) Mass media, advertising, and public relations:**

The American Humanist Association seeks to foster a profound change in American culture, promoting a society more strongly aligned with Humanist values and displacing the influence of religious fundamentalism and dogma. One of the principle means to accomplish this goal is by working to increase public awareness and acceptance of Humanism.

The propagation of Humanism in America is not just another organizational goal but a mission that can serve the larger interests of the nation and the global community. A substantial increase in public understanding and acceptance of Humanism will establish a needed counterweight to fundamentalist religious beliefs and practices, and will pave the way toward the evolution of a more humane and rational society.

Under the AHA's leadership, Humanist thought and practice will receive a fair hearing in the marketplace of ideas, and grow and flourish in twenty-first century America. Many Americans already hold views that are consonant with Humanism but have yet to learn of either the philosophy of Humanism or of organizations such as the AHA. By increasing awareness for Humanism in general, and the AHA in particular, the AHA aims to remove the stigma that is frequently attached to nontheistic life stances, and to sharply increase the proportion of Americans who self-identify as Humanists.

Toward these ends, the AHA proposes to employ mass media, advertising, and public relations to educate, advocate, and defend the Humanist viewpoint. Specifically, the AHA seeks to accomplish the following during the course of the next five years:

- Increase awareness of the terms *Humanist* and *Humanism* so they are more commonly recognized as describing adherents of the Humanist worldview as understood by the AHA;
- Redefine the philosophy of Humanism in the public mind as a specific worldview, inspired by positive values, not merely a synonym for non-belief in a god;
- Establish the AHA as the authoritative voice of organized Humanism in America, frequently consulted by media outlets and included in interfaith events, known for substantive accuracy, freedom from hyperbole, and accurate assessment of controversial issues.
- Build a “brand identity” for the AHA as an organization distinct from other freethought and progressive groups.

#### **The strategies that the AHA will use in pursuit of these objectives include:**

**a) Advertising:** The AHA will continue to target major regional and national media outlets. Recognizing the ability of advertising to convey new ideas and sway public opinion, the AHA will utilize paid media as much as practicable, establishing the AHA

as a leading progressive voice and defining Humanism as a key progressive philosophy well suited to lead America into the future.

The AHA will expand this campaign beyond its current utilization of mainly progressive periodicals. While maintaining a strong presence in the progressive political market, the AHA will reach out to other specific demographic audiences and publications deemed to be potentially receptive to the Humanist message. Eventually the AHA should establish a presence among major, general-audience media such as national television outlets and top-tier newspapers and journals. The AHA's advertising shouldn't be limited to print and broadcast media but cover many available mediums including those newly developed.

When possible, celebrity spokespeople should be utilized to assist in raising the profile of both the AHA and Humanism. Moreover, the AHA should also enlist the support of "professional celebrities" such as scientists and academics who are well known within their own professional circles and can assist in introducing the AHA to those particular groups.

**b) Earned media:** The AHA's profile, and that of Humanism, can be raised by taking actions that will generate "free" publicity. This should include issuing press releases through the national office (accompanied, where possible, by talking points and templates that can be readily adapted for use by local affiliates and grassroots activists). Media attention can also be gained through activities such as speaking engagements, conferences, and planned public events (marches, demonstrations, and protests).

By the end of the five-year plan, with its reputation as a sophisticated and capable communications-oriented organization established, the AHA should be sought out consistently by major media outlets as a source for information. AHA spokespersons will appear regularly in broadcast and print media, with national appearances averaging more than once a month and speaking appearances almost weekly. References to the AHA within news stories will reach the frequency of at least several every week.

**c) Media center:** Recognizing the need to create original content that is reflective of the Humanist viewpoint, the AHA intends to develop substantial media capabilities. While possibly beyond the five-year scope, opportunities will be sought to build the necessary infrastructure, because once it is established it will provide the ability to develop original programming, promotional materials, and entertainment.

## **2) Advocacy and Lobbying**

The AHA will continue to engage in direct and indirect lobbying through Capitol Hill visits, e-mail action alerts, letters to Congress, legislative coalition activity, and support of the lobbying efforts of the Secular Coalition for America. By devoting half a permanent staff person's time, along with support of an intern most of the year, and working closely with the staff of the Secular Coalition for America, the AHA is able to have a surprisingly significant impact on Humanist issues.

Legal advocacy should continue through the Appignani Humanist Legal Center. This includes the coordination and assistance of the legal team and engaging in amicus brief activity and litigation.

AHA positions on key current issues must be refined, along with more talking points that are current and relevant. In the hands of each member, AHA positions can become valuable advocacy tools. In order to support more letter writing, the AHA should find opportunities to train members in how to write competent letters in ways that help these letters get placed, and make sure they know where the AHA stands on issues.

Members should be further supported through a “Lobby Day” effort in Washington DC in collaboration with the Secular Coalition for America and other willing organizations. Those participating can return to their local chapters with stories and lead similar efforts back home at the state or local level. Establishing it as an annual event will be a positive step toward increasing the number of participants. Giving pins or other awards for those who perform lobby visits may provide a valuable incentive.

## **B. Strengthening the AHA**

### **1) Relations with local and regional chapters**

There are over sixty AHA chapters in the United States and dozens of other local and regional Humanist organizations that are affiliated with the AHA. They vary widely in size and vitality. As chapter development is costly in terms of staff power and financial investment, the AHA will focus efforts on strengthening existing chapters. The AHA’s current and planned efforts to influence public attitudes can pave the way for more expansive outreach efforts in the future.

There are many ways in which the AHA’s national programs support and facilitate chapter development. And those efforts to strengthen chapter relations can, if done with intention, strengthen the public relations programs as well. The AHA is aiming for this kind of synergy. When chapters grow they become increasingly effective assets for Humanism, and strengthened member commitments within each chapter bolster the AHA. Increased cooperation between chapters, as well as between the AHA and the individual groups, will benefit all involved.

In order to have an accurate running assessment of what is happening in the field, staff and volunteers must keep regular inventory. In addition to learning about demographic and programmatic shifts of chapters, knowledge must be attained about the degree to which local goals and activities match, detract from, or add to the broader national vision. Awareness should be raised of the best examples of vibrant organizations within the AHA family, while also noting outstanding examples from other groups (including some outside the United States). Information gathered should be used to make changes in AHA policies and suggest changes for chapters.

The AHA should operate as a hub of this communications network, receiving ideas and suggestions, redirecting them to other groups, and using them as springboards for generating new ideas. In order to further develop local leaders, leadership training should continue at the AHA’s annual conferences. As this process goes forward the result should be a more informed and motivated member base within groups, more unity between robust chapters, cross-group fertilization and reporting of endeavors, and enticement of additional chapters to form and/or affiliate.

The local outreach efforts should engage Humanists across the entire age spectrum, including early career adults and young families. In collaboration with the Humanist Society, the AHA should examine some of the more robust communities (religious and civic as well

as Humanist) and try to identify those programs that appeal to that age range. The AHA can then incorporate what is learned (resources, strategies, etc.) into efforts to support chapters as well as other activities.

## **2) Expanding the AHA Membership Base**

A strong membership base is a prerequisite for any serious grassroots endeavor. A multi-pronged campaign is needed to accelerate the AHA's growth. At the center of that campaign is a growing commitment to reaching out to potential members through the mail. Since many progressive people are Humanists, but have never recognized it, they need to be reached with mailings that explain Humanism and Humanist aims succinctly. A target of 150,000 pieces mailed will be a strong start, with subsequent annual 10 percent increases.

Tools like the HM3 cards and other such devices will be provided to individual members (directly and through local group contacts) that enable and encourage individual outreach. A concerted effort will be made to discover ways for members to promote Humanism in other groups of which they are also members. Advertising and public relations efforts will also complement more direct forms of membership outreach. Bind-in cards or tear-off forms will occasionally accompany advertisements in magazines and newspapers. And public relations efforts will include attempts to get on local television and radio, providing methods of follow up for the viewing/listening audiences.

Increased publicity, increased targeted direct mail, viral marketing through the use of the internet, MySpace, blogs, and YouTube video projects will help draw new people to the AHA's onramp for membership online. Conference speeches should be made available online for those who sign in to watch—thus enabling the AHA to capture contact information for follow up. Weekly e-mails and podcasting should also draw traffic, as will the advertising program.

Numerical goals are based on the idea that the multifaceted campaign will have benefits that build over time and include the following: 10,000 members by 2009 and 16,000 by 2011.

## **3) Coalition Building**

The AHA is uniquely positioned to play a strong role in coalition building because of its pivotal location and holistic philosophy. The AHA aims to increase collaboration on issues relevant to Humanism within the nontheist community, within secular lobbyist communities, and between secular and religious advocacy communities. This will garner respect for Humanist and nontheistic perspectives in allied secular and religious organizations as well as among opinion leaders. Active participation in religious and secular coalitions will be a priority, and efforts will be made to facilitate the continuation of the annual summit meetings of heads of national nontheistic organizations that the AHA inaugurated in 2005.

The AHA should form or join coalitions among lobbyists on Capitol Hill, doing so on Humanist issues such as church-state separation, defense of science, and environmental and social justice. To support this, the AHA should host coalition meetings, research legislation, organize congressional briefings and events, and bring new staff connections to bear when

the timing calls for such action. This will be accomplished through the combined contributions from AHA legislative staff (within the AHA's legal limits on lobbying activity), the Secular Coalition for America, and the Center for Humanist Activism (an AHA adjunct).

Coalition building efforts should be expanded to extend Humanism's influence beyond national borders. Active participation in the International Humanist and Ethical Union should remain a priority. The AHA must also stay alert to opportunities to participate in coalitions at the UN headquarters in New York that further Humanist interests.

## **C. Scholarship, Research, and Academic Outreach**

Humanism is not a finished work and, indeed, no branch of knowledge is ever complete. History and philosophy are in perpetual revision, especially seen through the fresh eyes of each new generation of scholars. Given the great advances being made in the natural sciences, such as stem cell research, and the potential for genetic engineering, conceptions of Humanism will be altered beyond the bounds of present thought. To remain relevant and to advance the AHA's agenda, therefore, Humanists need to integrate new research, creative applications of technology, and other significant discoveries and trends in ways that inform their Humanism. The AHA needs, as well, to nurture associations with the wider community of academics.

The AHA should consider the construction of an online database of significant recent scholarship that has defined Humanism, providing those who self-identify as Humanists with a resource to access for guidance. Online publishing of Humanist scholarship should be increased.

The AHA should continue to participate in scholarly ventures with other organizations such as the Humanist Institute, Institute for Humanist Studies, the American Ethical Union, the Freedom from Religion Foundation, and the Harvard Humanist Chaplaincy, which maintain libraries and hold regular meetings at which intellectual and national/international policy issues are discussed.

Some Humanist leaders have expressed interest in developing a coalition-oriented Humanist think tank. Should plans for such an institution solidify, the AHA should contribute leadership and direction to its development. The AHA should improve its two-way communication with researchers and scholars, and consider holding joint meetings with academic societies, particularly if a Humanist think tank is established. Notable scholars and researchers should be invited to AHA annual conferences for panel sessions on topics relevant to a valid Humanist future vision, such as therapeutic cloning, public education, and global health.

## **Conclusion**

The AHA's mission is broad and its goals are ambitious, but much can be done despite resource limitations. The next five years can mark a new beginning for Humanism in this country. The time is right for Humanism to enter the fray as a serious contender for the hearts and minds of the American mainstream.