

The official combined  
newsletter of the  
Freethought Society of  
Greater Philadelphia  
(FSGP) and the  
Humanist Association of  
Greater Philadelphia  
(HAGP)

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# The Greater Philadelphia Story

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2009

## Freethought Society



of Greater Philadelphia



## Humanist Association of Greater Philadelphia

## PhillyCOR Launches “Good Without God” Campaign; Humanist Chaplain & Author Greg Epstein Visits Philadelphia!

PhillyCOR is pleased to announce a new released October 27, 2009.

campaign entitled  
“Good Without  
God,” to be  
supplemented by  
three visits to  
Philadelphia by  
Humanist Chaplain,  
Greg Epstein,



author of “Good Without God: What A  
Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe,”

Most excitingly, the campaign  
will utilize ads on the sides of  
25 SEPTA buses, as well as  
interior ads on 25 SEPTA  
regional rail trains.

The ad image, pictured at left, is  
also being used in New York  
city, Chicago and Boston, and is

part of the United Coalition of Reason's

See **GOOD** on next page

## Margaret Downey Resumes FSGP Presidency

Due to Sally Cramer's resignation of the  
Presidency, nominations were opened for  
candidates in October via e-mail  
announcements and in person at the  
October program meeting. Being that  
Margaret Downey was the only nominee,  
the FSGP Board voted to appoint her  
president by acclamation, as afforded to  
them by the [FSGP Bylaws](#).

After a break of almost three years,  
Margaret will resume the FSGP presidency  
on November 1, 2009.

In case you don't know Margaret  
Downey's history, her biography is  
following.

Downey was born into a multi-cultural  
family in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.  
Growing up in a highly prejudiced southern  
society in the 1950s, Margaret became  
concerned about persecution from an early  
age. She has devoted her life to ending any  
and all discrimination against any and all  
peoples of the world.

Reading the literary work of Thomas  
Paine and Robert G. Ingersoll enabled  
Margaret to develop a keen sense of  
revolutionary thought. She became an  
openly declared atheist and activist in her  
twenties. Free from the constraints of

(See **President** on page 4)...

**GOOD**

Continued from previous page

national campaign as well.

The first visit by Greg Epstein will be at the University of Pennsylvania, co-sponsored by Secular Penn and Penn Hillel. Second, Epstein will be the guest author at HAGP and FSGP's co-sponsored book club on Sat., Nov. 21. Third, Epstein will appear at Congregation Mishkan Shalom on Sunday morning, hosted by the Rabbinical College. See the events calendar insert for details of these visits.

### Author Q & A with Greg Epstein

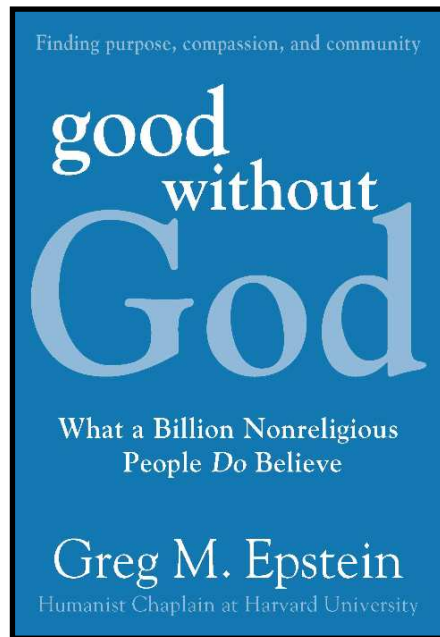
**Q: So you're arguing that people can be good without God?**

**A:** Of course you can be good without God. But that's not what the book is about. Because if you think we *can't* be good without God, that's not just your opinion. That's not just some brainstorm that crossed your mind. It's prejudice. It might even be discrimination. I mean, no one in his or her right mind would ever say, "Oh, you're a Catholic. How nice—is it possible for you to be a decent human being, too?" We wouldn't ask whether it's possible to be a good person and Jewish, or Muslim, or Buddhist. We don't ask whether you can be good and a Democrat, or a Republican (at least, *usually* we don't). So since we know that there are now millions and millions of people living without belief in a god, it's time to reject the question of *whether* we can be good without God.

However, the question *why* we can be good without God is much very much worth asking. And the question of *how* we can be good without God is absolutely crucial. Those are the questions I'm addressing in this book. They are the essential questions of Humanism.

**Q: Humanism—what's that, exactly? How does it differ from atheism or agnosticism?**

**A:** Humanism is formally defined as a progressive life stance, or philosophy of life, that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to live ethical lives of personal fulfillment, aspiring to the greater good of humanity. In other words, Humanism *is* being good without God. But the emphasis of Humanism is not simply on the "*without God*" part. It's not just about being an atheist, an agnostic, or a nonreligious person, although Humanism does provide a positive set of values for atheists and



agnostics. The emphasis of Humanism is on the *good*. It's on living a good life, for ourselves, for the sake of our loved ones and of all humanity and of the entire natural world that surrounds and sustains us.

**Q: And you're arguing that there are a billion Humanists? How do you arrive at that number?**

**A:** All the major recent studies of world religious beliefs, despite using different methodologies, will tell you that there are approximately one billion people who define themselves as nonreligious or secular. In America, there are approximately forty to fifty million nonreligious people, with the percentage of the nonreligious having gone up in every single state in the past twenty years. And there are even higher numbers

among young people—one in every four or five Americans aged 18 to 25 is nonreligious today. This is beyond a trend. It's a revolution.

Now, we all know what these people *don't* believe in. But for the longest time, there have been no books, no major works that examine and explain what these billion nonreligious people *do* believe in. If you look closely, most of us are believers in Humanism. We believe that this one world, the natural world, is the only world we will ever know, and this life is the only life we'll ever have, so we have to make it as good as we can. We believe in life *before* death.

**Q: Can a Humanist believe in God? Some of those nonreligious people actually say they do.**

**A:** "Do you believe in God?" is actually a totally meaningless question. Because in this day and age, the term God can mean anything you want it to mean. If you mean a bearded deity on a throne who worries about your personal lifestyle and issued 613 commandments, we reject that. But if saying you believe in God means you believe in nature, or the universe, or love, well, of course Humanists believe in those things, but we don't feel the need to call them God. We believe God is the most influential literary character ever created. But the real point is that there is no magical, supernatural force that is going to help us love one another or take care of one another or save the planet from war or climate change. We have to do those things for each other.

**Q: But where do you get your morality from, if not God or, say, the Ten Commandments? If we're nothing but selfish genes, why be good?**

**A:** Morality is not about religion. It's about cultivating compassion for other human beings—for other living creatures. But in a world where it can be so lonely and frightening to be a human being, having compassion for

(See **GOOD** on page 6)...

## Join FSGP!

You can also join or donate online using Paypal. Visit [www.FSGP.org/donate.html](http://www.FSGP.org/donate.html).

Check here if you are renewing.

Annual Membership Type	Price
<input type="checkbox"/> Individual	\$30
<input type="checkbox"/> Family	\$35
<input type="checkbox"/> Student/Limited Means	\$20
<input type="checkbox"/> Life Membership	\$1,000
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>E-member Discount</b>	-\$10

Be "Green" and Save \$\$\$!! Check here to receive publications via email and save \$10 a year!

Subtotal: \_\_\_\_\_

Additional Donation: \_\_\_\_\_

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### Other Information

I would like my membership/donation kept anonymous

I would like to volunteer.

Comments/suggestions:

**Please make check payable to the *Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia* and mail with this form to:**

**FSGP  
PO Box 242  
Pocopson, PA 19366**

The official registration and financial information of the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia may be obtained from the PA Department of State by calling toll-free, within PA, 1-800-732-0999. Registration does not imply endorsement.

## JOIN HAGP TODAY

*(If you don't want to join the AHA, but want to be affiliated with HAGP, become a Friend of HAGP! Friends can't vote in annual elections or run for the Board, but they receive all other benefits of HAGP membership.)*

\_\_\_ NEW MEMBERSHIP  
\_\_\_ RENEWAL

### Membership Types:

- Individual, \$25.00
- Family, \$35.00
- Student/Limited Means, \$15.00
- Sustaining member, \$50.00
- Patron, \$100.00
- Sponsor, \$150.00
- Lifetime, \$250.00
- Benefactor, \$500.00
- Building Fund, \$1000.00
- Friend of HAGP (\$15 for individuals, \$25 for families)

Name \_\_\_\_\_

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Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Spouse/Partner \_\_\_\_\_

Comments/suggestions:

**Mail your check (payable to HAGP) to**

**Humanist Association Of Greater Phila.  
P.O. Box 161  
Willow Grove, PA 19090-0161**

## President

*Continued from front page*

religious dogma and patriarchal systems, Margaret became involved with the feminist movement. Margaret fought for basic rights such as freedom of expression, freedom of choice, personal family leave for working parents, equal pay, and promotional opportunities for women.

Margaret was also involved in anti-smoking issues due to her concern with children's health. Being an activist for controversial issues nearly cost Margaret her job twenty-five years ago. The initiatives Margaret worked and sacrificed for then are commonplace today. Even as a single mother Margaret was willing to jeopardize her income to demand respect for women, freedom of choice, freedom of expression, and freedom from religious intrusion.

In 1980 Margaret became a business woman when she established her own interior design service. The independence of being the sole owner of a business enabled Margaret to become more involved in modern day issues. She is active in issues such as maintaining the Jeffersonian wall of church/state separation, freedom from religious intrusion, freedom of choice, and death with dignity.

Margaret founded the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia (FSGP) and the Anti-Discrimination Support Network (ADSN) in 1993. In 1994 Margaret founded the Thomas Paine Memorial Committee.

FSGP has taken a strong stand against prayers in public schools, and government sponsored invocations. Through her activism she has assured the placement of freethought literature in university and public libraries, and the avocation of rational thinking. Through city proclamations, Margaret has established "Freethought Week" and "Thomas Paine Day" in the City of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The City of Philadelphia also recognized "Privacy Week" thanks to a

proclamation submitted by Margaret in March 1997.

As a free-lance journalist and public speaker, Margaret has been published in two books, *Parenting Beyond Belief* and *Voices of Disbelief*.

The Thomas Paine Memorial Committee has established proper recognition for the memory of Thomas Paine in various Pennsylvania cities including Philadelphia, Lancaster, and York. Margaret is also the author of city proclamations in Cherry Hill, New Jersey and in Garden Grove, California. She also authored the Philadelphia City Council Resolution that declares June 8th as Thomas Paine Day. Margaret has been presenting a "Life and Work of Thomas Paine" to 5th and 6th grades since 1998.

ADSN is concerned with discrimination against the atheist community. ADSN monitors public office positions and public schools. In December of 1991 Margaret filed a discrimination case against the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) through the Human Relations Commission of Pennsylvania. After nearly eight years she lost her case against BSA. In the U.S. Supreme court case *James Dale v. Boy Scouts of America*, BSA declared itself "private" to avoid the question of open membership thus ending her appeal and many other court cases against BSA's discriminatory membership policy. ADSN efforts are responsible for convincing movie producer Steven Spielberg to disassociate himself from BSA.

ADSN acts immediately upon negative stereotyping by writing letters of complaint that demand the offending party to cease hate speech and issue a public apology and/or retraction. Injured parties are serviced through volunteer counselors and attorneys who are sympathetic to the nontheist community. ADSN's "Erasing Prejudice" program distributes information and training methods in order to develop a national

speakers bureau that teaches about tolerance and diversity at elementary, secondary, and university levels.

As ADSN's founder and president, Margaret has represented the interest of the nontheist community (since 1995) at several United Nations conferences and spoke at the United Nations Freedom of Religion and Belief meeting in New York City. She attended the 2001 United Nations Freedom of Religion and Belief Conference in Madrid, Spain.

Margaret is a past board member of the American Humanist Association (AHA) and the Thomas Paine National Historical Association. She is a current board member of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, The Humanist Institute, Scouting For All, the Godless Americans Political Action Committee, Advisory Board Member of the Robert Green Ingersoll Museum, and the Atheist Alliance International (AAI). With these connections Margaret keeps her finger on the pulse of the atheist community.

In the year 2002, Margaret became the first "Secular Humanist Celebrant" in Pennsylvania. Taking advantage of Pennsylvania's "Self-Uniting" marriage licenses, Margaret performs godless weddings, naming ceremonies and funerals. Her secular naming ceremony was featured on PBS in 2008.

Margaret served as president of AAI for two years hosting two conventions during her 2006-2008 term. The 2007 convention kicked off her passion for uniting the nontheist community and she is working toward helping to organize a Unity Convention.

Margaret has been a guest speaker on National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation* and *Radio Times*. She has also been featured on radio programs in Texas, South Carolina, California, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Florida, New York, and Georgia, and most recently China. Always willing to travel, Margaret accepts national and international speaking engagements.

## Newsletter Freebie Policy

We'll be pleased to send one free newsletter to any person upon request. After that, please subscribe to *The G.P.S.* by using the membership forms located on page three of this issue. Or, become a member online at [www.fsgp.org/join](http://www.fsgp.org/join) or [www.hagp.org/join](http://www.hagp.org/join).

## Newsletter Submissions

Submit your newsletter items (Letters to the Editor, opinion pieces, stories, etc.), by emailing it/them to us at [fsgp@freethought.org](mailto:fsgp@freethought.org) or [admin@hagp.org](mailto:admin@hagp.org).

Preference is given to dues-paying members and to material in a PC-compatible word processing format.

### FSGP Board Members

Margaret Downey, <i>President</i>	Dan Hoffman, <i>Treasurer</i>
Brian Barrish	Bob Kay
Brian Bohmueller, <i>Vice-Pres.</i>	Shaun McGonigal, <i>Blogger</i>
<i>Secretary</i> —Open	Sue O'Connell
Barry Greenstein	Javier Pazos, <i>Videographer</i>
	Scott Pleune

### Honorary Members

Bill Baird  
 Jack Kevorkian  
 Alton Lemon  
 Michael Newdow  
 Elliott Welsh

**Check out FSGP's Blog**  
 visit [http://  
 freethoughtsociety.  
 wordpress.com](http://freethoughtsociety.wordpress.com)

The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia is a 501(c)(3) educational organization created to foster a community of nontheists dedicated to improving the human condition through rational inquiry and creative thinking unfettered by superstition, religion, or any form of dogma. As stated in the Articles of Incorporation—Domestic Nonprofit Corporation, filed on July 27, 1993, FSGP's purpose is to promote the Constitutional principle of separation of church and state and to educate the public on matters related to nontheist beliefs. FSGP is a chapter of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, is a member affiliate of the Atheist Alliance International, and a participating organization in the Greater Philadelphia Coalition of Reason (PhillyCOR).

### HAGP Board Members

	Jim Childress	
	<i>Book Club Moderator</i>	<i>Board Members</i>
<i>President</i>	Eileen Childress	Shirley Goss
Joe Fox <a href="mailto:admin@hagp.org">admin@hagp.org</a>	<i>Movie Night Coordinator</i>	Elaine Oxman
<i>Director/Celebrant</i>	Peter Gagliardi	Ric Hopkins
Martha Knox <a href="mailto:celebrant@hagp.org">celebrant@hagp.org</a>	<i>Transhumanist Discussion Group</i>	Rosemary Horstman
<i>Treasurer</i>	<i>Moderator</i> Will Wieland	Brian Bohmueller
Warren Goss	<a href="mailto:transhumanism@hagp.org">transhumanism@hagp.org</a>	
<i>Secretary</i>		

HAGP is an educational and philosophical organization whose main goal is to educate the general public about the ethics and values of Humanism by being a positive influence in the community. HAGP accomplishes this through meetings and lectures (free to the public); community service, networking, encouraging debates and humanistic activities, and continuing efforts through letter-writing, dialogue and other educational means to maintain the Jeffersonian "wall of separation" between church and state. The only requirement for membership is interest in the principles of Humanism. Participation ranges from simply attending meetings to becoming actively involved in projects. HAGP is affiliated with the American Humanist Association and the Council for Secular Humanism, and is a participating organization in the Greater Philadelphia Coalition of Reason (PhillyCOR).

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**GOOD***Continued from page 2*

others is easier said than done. We can get sick, die, or have our heart broken at any moment—there is so much to be afraid of, and when we are afraid, we become selfish. We try to protect ourselves, even if it's at the expense of others.

This is why all religions have always had something like a “golden rule” that says, “do unto others what you would have done to you.” Or better yet the more modest version, “don't do to others what you yourself find hateful.” This idea shows up in every one of the major world religious traditions, and also in Humanism, but not because God gave it to us. It's because without a golden rule, we would never have survived as a species. We would have destroyed one another. Of course, we still have the potential to do just that. In the book I present a number of the ways Humanism can help us overcome selfishness and self-destructiveness to live more ethically, generously, and lovingly.

**Q: You've taken some heat from fellow atheists for being critical of the “new atheists,” like Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Richard Dawkins. How do your views differ from theirs?**

**A:** I respect a lot of what Harris, Dawkins, and others are trying to do. But Harris has said, “Science must destroy religion.” Dawkins has likened religious education to child abuse. Hitchens has said we need to prepare for war with religion. And recently Bill Maher upped the rhetorical ante, if that's possible, by saying that “for humanity to live, religion must die.” Such statements aren't helpful. Humanism isn't trying to erase

religion. It's an embracing philosophy. We're not saying we're any better, even any more reasonable, than religious people.

Most nonreligious people are not anti-religious, and we're happy to admit you can also be good *with* God. We just want to be considered as equals in politics, in culture, in society. We believe in pluralism, in interfaith cooperation, in religious literacy, but it's not okay to talk about those things anymore without talking about Humanism. President Obama has been very good at this—including Humanists in the public conversation. He's one of the most Humanist presidents we've had in generations.

**Q: But Obama is religious?**

**A:** He is a liberal Christian, but he talks often about how his father was an atheist and his mother, who shaped his vision of goodness and humanity, was a Humanist. He is the first US president to have mentioned Humanism by name in several major speeches, always acknowledging that the nonreligious have an important role to play in helping society move forward. Others should follow his example.



**Harvard's Humanist**

**Q: In the book you attack the Rev. Rick Warren for saying he could never vote for an atheist for president. Yet you also say he is right about some things. What's going on there?**

Well, Rick Warren is potentially the most influential Protestant Minister in the world today, and yet he frequently uses his platform to say that all atheists are arrogant

and therefore unfit for political office. I find spreading that kind of sweeping generalization about any group of people to be un-Christian, to say the least.

However I want to acknowledge that Warren is at least partially right about one important idea. In his book *The Purpose Driven Life*, he talks about how “it's not about you.” How living a good life means getting beyond selfishness and solipsism, and dedicating yourself to a purpose higher than just you. I think that's absolutely right. Unfortunately, Warren also believes that belief in Jesus Christ is the only purpose worth living for, and those who don't accept Jesus will spend eternity in Hell. Suffice it to say I disagree with that. There is more than one way to be a good person.

**Q: You point out that Humanism was around long before the new atheists. Did it originate in the Enlightenment, in Europe? Or would you say it goes all the way back to Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle?**

**A:** Actually Humanism, though it hasn't always been known by that name, traces its roots back to the ancient East *and* West. In my second chapter, I give some key examples of great thinkers and leaders who have embodied goodness without God in ancient India, Greece, and the Arab and Muslim world. I talk about Thomas Jefferson as the first Humanist head of state, and I talk about the great Humanist feminist and civil rights leaders like Frances Wright, Susan B. Anthony, and A. Phillip Randolph. Of course, I also cover the *original* four horsemen of the atheist apocalypse—Freud, Nietzsche, Marx, and Darwin.

**Q: So why hasn't it caught on more until now?**

First of all, the idea of being good without God has always been more than a little dangerous to the powers that be. When leaders have nothing to offer their people but exploitation, they've always been able to promise rewards in Heaven. When we point out there is no Heaven, we're holding their feet to the fire, pressuring them to do more now. So Humanists have

faced oppression.

But today, there is more scientific evidence for a naturalistic worldview than ever before. And our societies are becoming more diverse—more of us have friends and co-workers from other religions, so we can see our gods are no better or more real than theirs are. And so now, for the first time in history, Humanists and the nonreligious are coming together on a massive level to create a movement, a cohesive community of people who are good without God.

**Q: Isn't this idea controversial within the atheist community—that you're building a church without God?**

**A:** It's not necessarily a Church without God because that would imply this is only for people from Christian culture. Actually people from every national, cultural, religious, and ethnic background are getting involved in Humanism—in the book I talk about the ways people are combining Humanist philosophy with Jewish culture, or Buddhist meditation techniques. I talk about how even Richard Dawkins likes to go caroling and calls himself a cultural Christian. So goodness without God is multicultural.

But we are organizing communities—you might even call them God-free congregations. Human beings evolved as social animals. Even the most independent-minded, freethinking people sometimes want and need an organized network of likeminded people to connect with and be cared for by. If there's no God, we have to build that together! And we're doing so. My community at Harvard and many others like it are creating nonreligious meditation groups, holding discussions over good food and drinks, creating parenting support groups, doing community service, sponsoring interfaith and intercultural dialogues—everything great about a church community but no prayer and no requirement to get up early on a perfectly cozy Sunday morning. Not bad, right?

**Q: Why do you call yourself a Humanist “chaplain”, though? Isn't that an oxymoron?**

**A:** The word chaplain comes from Christianity, but so does the word “doctor.” So does the word “goodbye.” Chaplain means a member of the clergy that serves outside a formal church—such as in the army, in a hospital, or at a University. We have long been aware that we also need helping professionals for the non-Christians in those environments—there are Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist Chaplains. Why not Humanists? If it is an oxymoron to say that people who don't believe in God still need caring and community, I'm proud to be a walking oxymoron.

## GOOD WITHOUT GOD Author Tour

CHICAGO	October 26 – 27
NEW YORK	October 28 – 29
BOSTON	November 1 – 13
SAN FRANCISCO	November 16 – 18
PORTLAND	November 19
<b>PHILADELPHIA</b>	<b>November 20 – 23</b>

*(see Events Calendar insert for details)*

## FSGP

### Renewals

BARRISH, P.B.  
 DEMILLION FAMILY  
 FREYD, P.  
 NARCOWICH, M.  
 SHAPIRO, B.  
 SILVERSTEIN, H.  
 STRASBURGER, A.  
 VIZER, L.  
 ZACHARIAS, M.

### New Members

LEIPER FAMILY  
 WILLBERGH, M.  
 WILSON, C.

### General Fund Contributors

CONNOR, C.J.	\$12.50
FREYD, P.	\$20.00
HOFFMAN, D.	\$20.00
HOFFMAN, D.	\$20.00
NARCOWICH, M.	\$15.00
PACELL, R.	\$3.00
SEPT MEETING	\$25.00
WILLBERGH, M.	\$10.00

### Helping Hands Committee

Enjoy helping the community by joining with others in a variety of community-service projects from a secular perspective.

If interested in joining the mailing list to receive service opportunity announcements, email us at [fsgp@freethought.org](mailto:fsgp@freethought.org).

# See insert for your complete Freethought and Humanist events calendar!

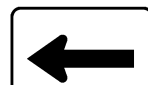
## HAGP Elections

It's the end of the year, which means time for HAGP Elections! HAGP has rolling elections of Board Members and there are three openings for 2010. The officer positions of President, Vice President, Secretary and Treasurer will be determined by the newly elected Board. If you are an HAGP member in good standing and interested in running for the Board, or you want to nominate a member who you think is interested, let us know! Email [admin@hagp.org](mailto:admin@hagp.org) or call 215-475-2573.

## PhillyCOR's Secular Service Club Participates in United COR's National Secular Service Day

PhillyCoR's Secular Service Club participated in the first National Secular Service Day by cleaning up a community garden at Teens 4 Good in Philadelphia on Saturday, Oct. 31. Look for a photo in the next newsletter.

You can learn more about the Secular Service Club at PhillyCoR's website, [www.phillycor.org](http://www.phillycor.org). If you'd like to be on the Secular Service Club's email announcement list send an email to [celebrant@hagp.org](mailto:celebrant@hagp.org) with "Service Club" in the subject line.



Check the top of your mailing label for renewal information. Please renew if "Exp 9-09" or "Exp 10-09" (or earlier) appears on your label. The membership form is located on page 3 of this issue. *Thank you!*

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

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