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Results of HALA Membership Survey

By Rod Martin

In October, 2013, the Board of HALA decided to survey our members and friends to get a better understanding of what they particularly want to get out of our monthly meetings, the topics and meeting formats that they prefer, and what other sorts of activities they'd like HALA to be involved in. The survey was administered on-line via the HALA website. Between the beginning of November and the end of December, 27 members and 21 non-members (friends) filled out the survey, for a total of 48 respondents (out of 61 members and 98 friends who were sent emails inviting them to participate).

In analyzing the results, I first compared the average responses of members with non-members. Overall, members and non-members revealed very similar views regarding the main purpose of our monthly meetings (e.g., learning something new about science and other topics; learning about Humanism; discussing ideas with other people). However, across the board, non-members were considerably less interested than members in all the monthly meeting formats and topics that we asked about in the survey. This striking finding suggests that one of the main reasons why some individuals have chosen not to formally join HALA may be that they are simply less interested in any of the meeting topics and formats that we offer at our monthly meetings. On the other hand, non-members showed a stronger preference than members for some different types of activities such as starting a Facebook page and events such as movie nights and meetings at a pub or restaurant. Perhaps our friends might be more interested in becoming full-fledged members if we were to offer a greater variety of meeting venues and formats besides our regular monthly meetings. This raises the question of whether we have the will and person-power to branch out in these sorts of new directions or if we should continue to focus our energies on what we know best.

For the remainder of this report, I will focus particularly on the results from HALA members in order to explore in more detail their interests and preferences. Among the 27 members who responded, 8 (30%) have been attending HALA for a year or less, 14 (52%) have been attending for "a few years," and 5 (18%) have been attending for "many years." I compared the results of newer members (one year or less) and long-time members (more than a year) to get a sense of whether there are any differences between these two groups in their interests and preferences. I think it's particularly important to take note of any such differences in order to ensure that we continue to attract and retain newer, younger members by seeking to meet their

needs and interests, while also making sure we don't neglect our long-time members. Interestingly, I found that newer and long-time members were quite similar, for the most part. However, they did show a few significant differences in some areas, which will be noted in the discussion below.

1. Purpose of Monthly Meetings

In the first question of the survey, we wanted to know what the respondents personally most want to get from our monthly meetings. They were presented with five possible reasons why someone would want to come to our meetings, and were asked to indicate how important each of these is to them (ranging from 0 = not at all important to 4 = extremely important). The results from this question are presented below in Figure 1. As shown in this graph, learning something new about science and other topics, learning more about Humanism and how it can be applied to our lives, discussing ideas with other people, and making friends and socializing (in that order) were all rated as moderately to very important by our members. Learning about ways to become more involved in social action and volunteer activities was rated as being somewhat less important. There were significant differences, however, between members who have been attending for a year or less and those who have been attending for more than a year. In particular, the newer members rated both discussing ideas with others (Mean = 3.13) and learning about ways to become involved in social action and volunteer activities (Mean = 2.63) as considerably more important than did the long-time members (Mean = 2.05 and 1.37 respectively). This suggests that it may be important for HALA to provide our newer members with more opportunities for discussion as well as ways of engaging in social action.

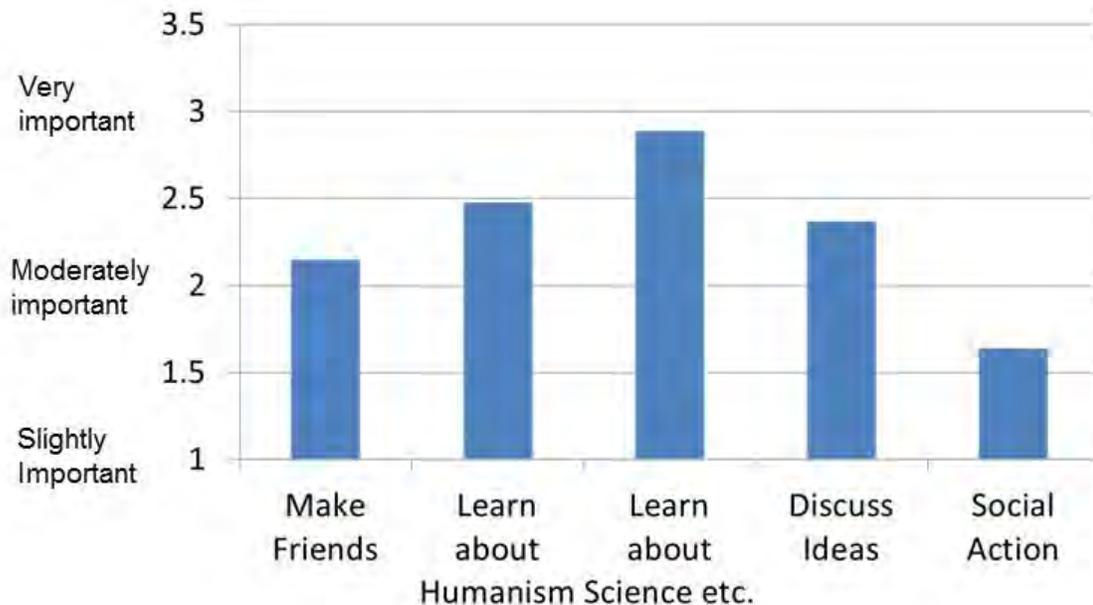


Figure 1: Purpose of Monthly Meetings

In addition, respondents were asked to type in any other important benefits that they seek to get from our monthly meetings. Responses to this open-ended question included the following:

- Being in the presence of like-minded people
- Being made aware of other Humanist/atheist/freethought organizations and their events
- Exposure to bright people.

- Feeling good about my beliefs (or lack thereof).
- How Humanism can be applied to improve human life (tall order but Humanism is a nascent major player)
- I am interested in learning about and discussing social and economic issues, perhaps with a Humanist slant
- Networking and possibly using contacts and advice for better employment.
- Sense of community and stimulating thoughts and ideas
- To learn more about Humanism and how we can spread this belief around the plane!

2. Formats of Monthly Meetings

In the second question in the survey, we were interested in knowing what types of meeting formats and speakers our members prefer for our monthly meetings. They were given a number of possible meeting formats and were asked to rate how much they like each one (on a scale from 0 = don't like at all to 4 = like extremely). The results of this question are presented below in Figure 2, which shows that the format that the members like the most involves presentations specifically about Humanism (e.g., Humanist principles, values, history, beliefs, spirituality, etc.). Nearly as well liked are presentations of UWO professors and other experts about a field of interest other than Humanism (e.g., science, philosophy, history, politics, social issues, etc.). Other formats that are liked between “moderately” and “a lot” are: video presentations followed by discussion; HALA members relating how they became a Humanist and what Humanism means to them; other presentations by HALA members (e.g., review of a book relating to Humanism); and moderated group discussions about a particular topic of relevance to Humanism without having a guest speaker. Finally, members indicated that they moderately like small group discussions about a particular topic of relevance to Humanism (4-5 people per

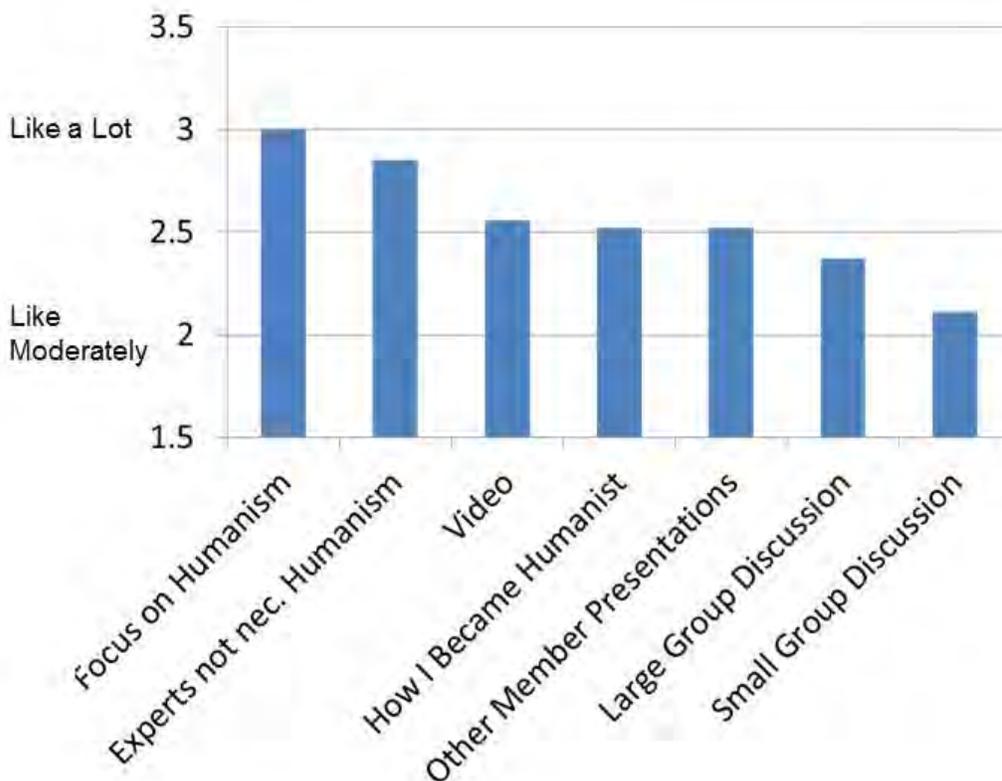


Figure 2: Formats of Monthly Meetings

group) followed by everyone getting back together to share ideas. These findings suggest to me that our members are generally interested in a variety of meeting formats, and it might be beneficial to try to vary the types of meetings we have from month to month, including large and small group discussion formats, which we haven't done in recent years. Interestingly, on this question of meeting formats, no significant differences emerged between newer members and long-time members, indicating that both groups have similar preferences.

Respondents were also invited to type in additional meeting formats that they might be interested in. Responses to this question included the following:

- Debates/discussions between different beliefs or points of view. e.g. climate change, evolution
- Discussion about the role of Humanism in modern society. What can be done?
- Meetings in a more 'public' space - with an invited person from 'away'
- Small local volunteer project followed by discussion
- Moderate Islamists, Mormons, Catholic, Jewish, and others committed to a faith; having an open Q&A

3. Topics for Monthly Meetings

In the third question, we were interested in finding out what types of topics our members are most interested in learning about and/or discussing at our monthly meetings. They were asked to rate a number of general topic areas (0 = not at all interested to 4 = extremely interested).

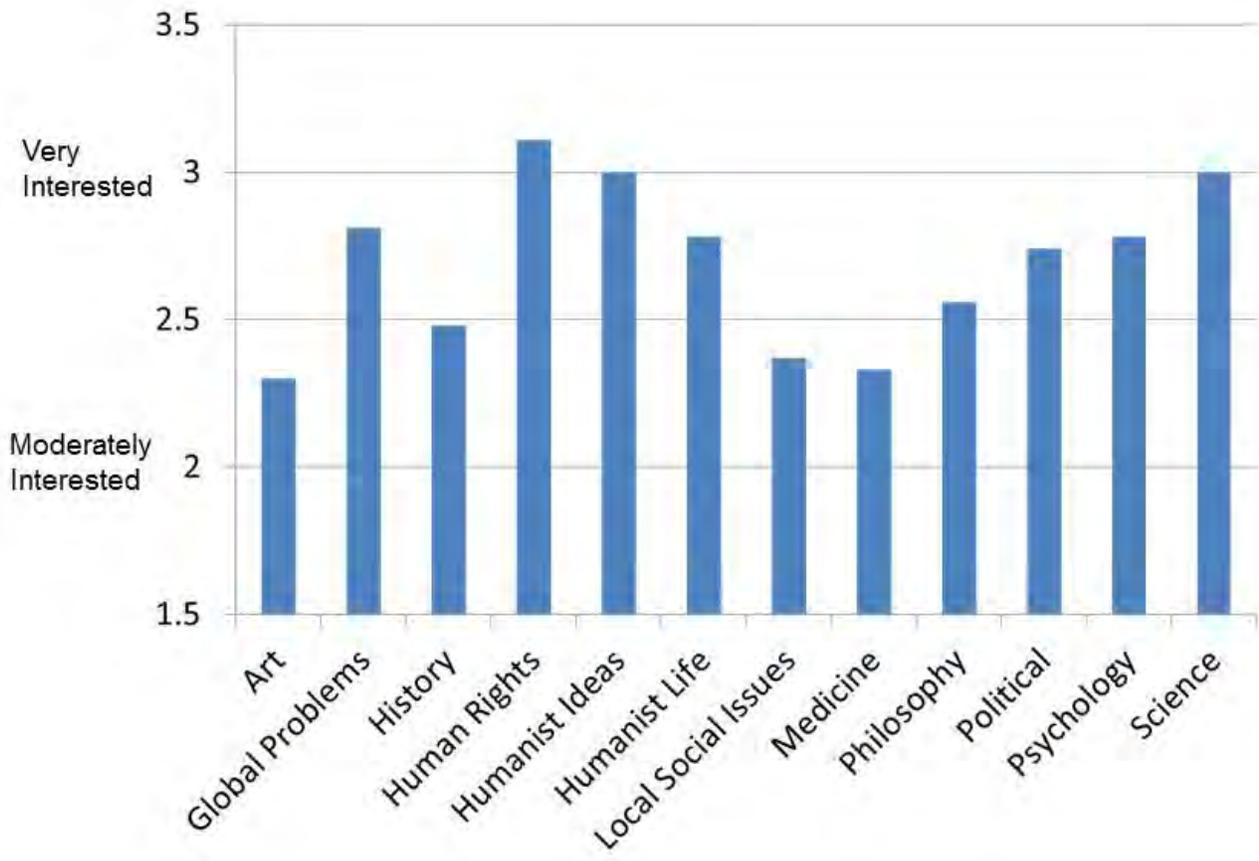


Figure 3: Topics for Monthly Meetings

The results from this question are presented in Figure 3 (previous page), which shows that the highest ratings (“very interested”) were given to: Human rights issues (e.g., dying with dignity, gay rights, child labour, equality); Humanist ideas (beliefs, principles, history, philosophical origins, arguments against religion, etc.); and Science (e.g., evolution, neuroscience, astronomy). The following topics were not far behind: Global problems (e.g., war, hunger, global warming, education); Humanist lifestyle (applying Humanism to everyday life, Humanist/secular spirituality, ethics, etc.); Psychology/ mental health/ emotional well-being; Political issues (e.g., capitalism vs. socialism); and Philosophical issues (e.g., free will vs. determinism). The remaining topics, although rated a little lower, were still given higher than a “moderately interested” rating: History (e.g., history of Western thought, etc.); Local social issues (e.g., food bank, bullying in schools, homelessness); Medicine (e.g., new treatments for particular illnesses); and Art, poetry, music and literature. In sum, it is clear that our members are intellectually curious and enjoy learning about a wide range of topics, particularly those with some relevance to Humanism.

A few significant differences were found between newer and long-time members on this question. Newer members were somewhat more interested than long-time members in learning about human rights (3.38 vs. 3.0) and medicine (2.88 vs. 2.11). In contrast, long-time members were more interested than newer members in learning about art (2.47 vs. 1.88), philosophy (2.74 vs. 2.13), and political issues (2.89 vs. 2.38).

In addition, respondents were invited to type in any additional topics that they are interested in learning about at our meetings. The responses to this question included the following:

- A steady stream of arguments against religion is becoming old hat. ‘Atheist’ refers to what we are not (i.e., theist). Hum.
- Ecology, activism, credibility, feminism, volunteerism, playwrights that use their medium to express their thoughts
- Ethics in society today
- Proportional representation vs first past the post
- Public vs private education

4. Other HALA Activities

The fourth question in the survey asked respondents to check off which of several activities they would like to see HALA become involved in, in addition to our monthly meetings, summer picnics, and winter solstice parties. The results of this question are presented in Figure 4 (next page).

Although none of these activities were endorsed by a majority of members, a considerable amount of support was shown for HALA becoming involved in the following: Social events (e.g., movie night, meeting at a pub or restaurant)(48%); participating in local community/ charity activities (44%); and a Humanist book club (37%). Somewhat less interest was shown for starting a HALA Facebook page (22%) and a Sunday morning fellowship meeting (15%). Compared to long-time members, a significantly larger proportion of newer members indicated interest in a Facebook page (38% vs. 16%) and charitable activities (63% vs. 37%). There appears to be a considerable amount of interest among our newer members in becoming actively involved in charitable causes in the community as well as having a social media presence.

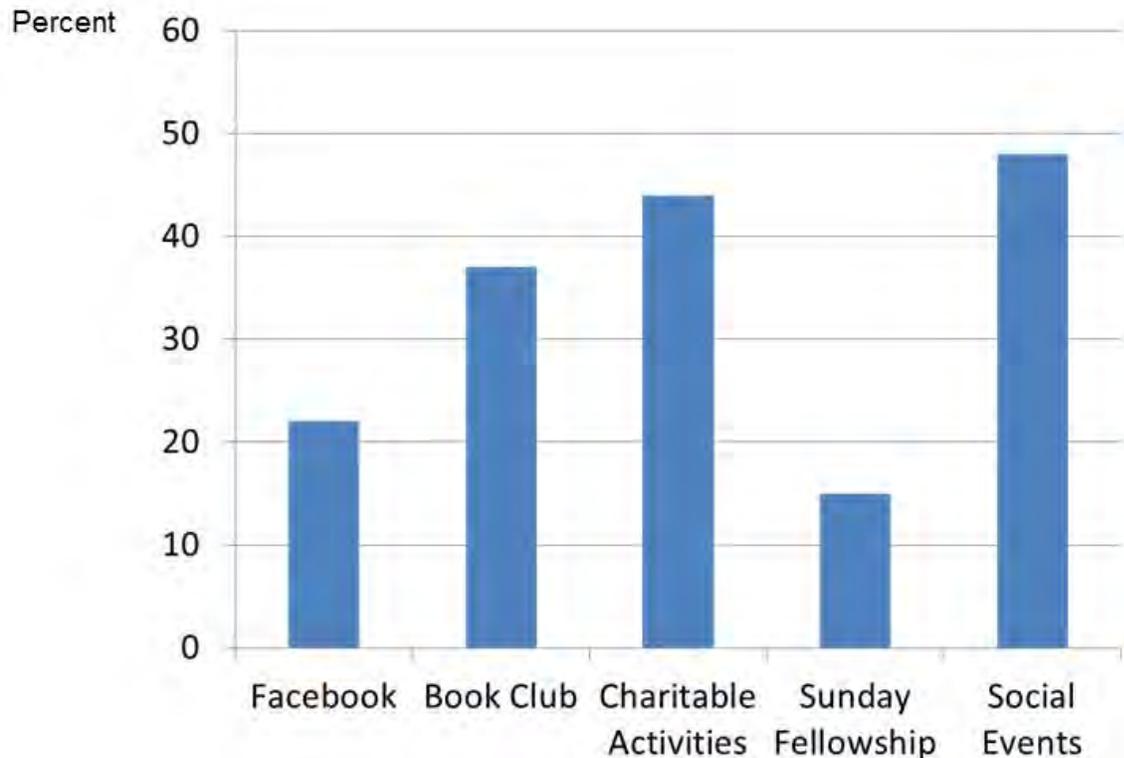


Figure 4: Other Activities for HALA

Additional Questions

The survey also asked respondents to indicate ways in which they might be able to help HALA, and were invited to give their name if they wished to help. In all, 6 members provided their name and indicated a willingness to help with advertising (5), newsletter (3), developing a Facebook page (3), serving on a committee (4), organizing solstice parties and social events (2), and/or giving talks or presentations (3). We are very grateful for these volunteers and hope to get them involved in these activities in the near future.

Respondents were also asked how they first learned about HALA. The most frequent ways members have learned about us are through the Unitarian Fellowship (33.3%) and by word of mouth or from a friend (29.6%). Smaller but still significant numbers were introduced to us through the HALA website (18.5%), or by attending a HALA public event such as those at the Wolf Performance Hall (14.8%). Only one member had learned about us through a poster at a public library or other location.

Finally, respondents were asked to type in any other suggestions or comments they might have to help us plan future directions for HALA. The responses to this open-ended question included the following:

- Develop collaborative associations with other Humanist groups. What might we effectively do in numbers vs. HALA alone?

- Humanists need to develop an image or brand, with which the public can identify positively.
- I joined HALA with the hope that I would learn more about science, religions, and humanism/atheism. I had also hoped that we, as a group, would be socially active in our community, raising awareness and education through info booths at major public events, group fundraising for charities...fun stuff like that.
- I think the organization is fine. I'm from out of town so my attendance is erratic. I try to attend.
- Keep asking, then listen and try new things for growth and expansion - include a youth group in your speaker outreach.

Conclusion

I wish to thank all the members and friends who took the time to complete the survey. Nearly half of our members responded, providing us with a very good sample from which to draw conclusions. Your input has been very informative, and will be helpful to the Board in planning future directions for HALA. In general, it appears that our members are open to experimenting with a variety of meeting formats and are interested in a broad range of topics. While it appears that our members wish to focus particularly on Humanism and closely related issues at our meetings, they are also interested in a broad array of topics ranging from science to politics to art and literature. There is also considerable interest in engaging in other sorts of activities besides our monthly meetings, such as movie nights, meetings at pubs and restaurants, starting a book club, and getting involved in charitable activities, perhaps as a way of making Humanism more visible to the public. As we think about ways of attracting and retaining new, younger members, I think it's important to pay particular attention to the interests of our current new members, especially when they differ from those of long-time members. In this regard, our newer members expressed particular interest in the following: having opportunities to discuss ideas with others; getting involved in charitable and volunteer activities; and starting a Facebook page. These are areas in which I think we should particularly focus our attention in the near future. To do these sorts of things, we will need to draw on volunteer help from our members. At the same time, it is important to continue what we have been doing well, and to meet the needs and interests of all our members, both new and old.

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A Heads-up For The Next HALA Wolf Hall Event

Featured Speaker – Dan Barker

Topic – Losing Faith in Faith

Date – Wednesday June 11th, 2014

Place – Wolf Hall in the Central London Library



Dan Barker

Dan Barker, along with his wife Laurie Gainer, is the current co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. For nineteen years he served as a Christian preacher and musician, but left Christianity in 1984 announcing to his friends that he was an atheist. Later that year he appeared on AM Chicago in a show about “kicking the religious habit,” with host Oprah Winfrey. He met his future wife on this show and they married in 1987.

Please mark your calendar now for this important occasion and also inform your friends. More information will be provided as we get closer to the date.



2013

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