



AAR Annual Business Meeting
Virtual Meeting
June 24, 2025
7:00 – 8:00 PM Eastern Time
Draft Minutes

Executive Director Claudia Schippert announced that quorum was met.

President Leela Prasad called the meeting to order at 7 p.m. eastern time.

I. Welcome by President Leela Prasad

The agenda was approved by acclamation

Minutes of the November 2024 AAR Annual Business Meeting were approved by acclamation.

II. President's Report (Leela Prasad)

The guiding concerns of this presidential year were restoring AAR's financial strength, collaborating with other organizations, fostering public scholarship, improving academic labor conditions, assisting Religious Studies departments/programs, recognizing the diversity of work in Religious Studies, and cultivating inclusivity in our field.

Several of these concerns took on special urgency in recent months. There's been an increased need to stand in solidarity with other organizations and to discern how our mission and goals should guide decisions about whether to sign on to various statements. The AAR board has devoted special attention to this. As programs and departments face increasing risks of closure, our Academic Relations Committee produced webinars on strategy and a toolkit for Religious Studies (now on the AAR website). With diversity policies under attack, the work of our status committees is particularly valuable. AAR committees also have drafted best practices for contingent faculty and for public scholarship on religion.

President Prasad's own initiatives include collaborating with the Boniuk Institute on new standards for religious literacy and respect, investigating whether the AAR might

create its own Institutional Review Board, dialogue on international connections, and discussions on strengthening relations between AAR regions and the AAR as a whole. President Prasad has designed three presidential plenary sessions, all on the theme of freedom. The first is tomorrow 11 a.m. (eastern) on rescued elephants; the second will be a musical performance/community-building event highlighting liberation movements of oppressed people. The third will be a panel discussion called "The Sovereignty of Hope," on freedom in the academy.

III. Treasurer's Report - (Pre-recorded by Nikia Robert).

The AAR Finance and Audit Committee prioritizes transparency, sustainability, and increasing revenues. There has been a decline in the value of AAR assets due to increases in annual meeting cost, market fluctuations in the value of our investments, and the large cost of instituting new systems for our association and website (AMS and CMS systems).

The AAR Board of Directors has approved a 2026 budget that reduces costs in every area. The AMS and CMS are now in place, so those consultancy fees will no longer be a burden. As a result of these new systems, the AAR has internalized more functions, which will save on subscription costs. Also, one staff position has been eliminated, lowering salary expenses. The Board has voted to restructure our grants and awards in a fashion that will cut those expenses roughly in half (see Executive Director's report below). Moving forward, AAR leadership continues to seek ways to increase revenues.

IV. Executive Director's Report (Claudia Schippert)

This past year has been very busy for AAR, as chronicled in our weekly newsletter. We have maintained and expanded a robust publication program, offered grants and awards, convened the traditional November and the new online June annual meetings, enhanced year-round programming, and begun to tackle the larger challenges facing our learned society. Today I want to note three particular observations.

First, Operational Innovations. The heaviest lift this year has been the implementation of new Association Management and Content Management Systems (AMS and CMS). Few AAR staff members - myself included - foresaw the huge time-investment (not to mention the significant financial cost) required to build, implement, test, and launch these new systems. Some aspects of both systems are still being developed, but they are mostly implemented, and we are pleased with the results.

The AMS is the backend of the two systems. You will never really see it, but when you log into your profile, register for webinars or – soon – engage in communities, you are in it. The new AMS provides core functionalities for maintaining member data, financial transactions, and details on elections, grants, awards, and our governance structures. As we come to rely more fully on this new system, we can reduce reliance on other software, subscriptions, and products, which will offset the costs of our initial investment. The CMS - i.e., the new website - is more visible to members. While some aspects of its development are ongoing, we are pleased with the new website. It significantly improves our functionality, content, and possibilities for outreach and integration with social media. Also: the search function actually works! Available analytics confirm that more members are using the website, staying on pages longer, browsing, and finding the information they want.

Many thanks to my hard-working AAR staff colleagues for their tireless work to produce the best possible support for our members. I feel fortunate to work with such an excellent staff, in addition to working with a thoughtful board and our engaged members.

Secondly, I spent a good amount of time last year trying to better understand how to meet our mission within a continuously shifting higher education landscape. The field of religious studies and its employment profiles continue to shift, which requires the AAR to change. Collectively, we have taken steps to respond. For example, we have reduced the allotted sessions for the largest Program Units, which begins to address “the proliferation problem” at the November meeting. With the addition of the June sessions, expansion of year-round programming in webinars, certificate programs, and mentoring cohorts, we now use diverse delivery methods for scholarly content and professional networking. This allows us to reach beyond a traditional academic community and enlarges our public engagement. Additionally, we've begun to critically examine the assumptions about governance and funding models that underwrite the AAR's current structures. Although we have not yet produced solutions, we are asking the right questions. We must continue to ask hard questions, test approaches, and find innovative solutions to the financial challenges brought of rampant inflation, a dwindling professoriate, and the removal of federal grant monies.

This past year I also saw positive results of financial transparency. Many of you (members), once informed about the issues we face, are willing and able to help the AAR find solutions and new directions. I believe we can make the AAR's membership larger and more inclusive, engage with diverse publics, and care for the field broadly construed. By expanding our outreach, we will also increase our visibility and potential revenues.

Finally, the stress on our guild and higher education more broadly has been rendered ever more precarious in the last four to five months. We have stood firmly behind AAR's core commitments, endorsed and signed important statements by partner organizations, and issued a clear statement denouncing the unprecedented banning of books in the Navy Academy library. (Update June 2, 2025: many previously banned books have since reappeared on the shelves, quite possibly as a result of swift and clear reactions from a number of public stakeholders, AAR included.) I strongly believe that advocating for Religious Studies and the Humanities more broadly falls within our responsibility as a learned society.

We need to balance commitment to our core values with strategic thinking - that is, uphold our values without putting a target on our back. This is not always easy in our current difficult political atmosphere. Academic freedom, fiduciary obligations, and moral commitments are different, but I believe we can balance them in ways that enable the AAR's continued ability to serve members and defend the values of academic freedom and critical inquiry.

I have no illusion that the next year will be easy, but I do believe that we have the collective resources, capacity, and expertise (of 6000 members) to respond ethically, strategically, and wisely.

I want to close by expressing my sincere appreciation for your membership and participation in our learned society, for your commitment to academic integrity and to social justice, and your steady support of the AAR's important mission.

V. Changes in Grants and Award Programs (Claudia Schippert)

As approved by the Board of Directors, we had a one year pause in grants and awards (not including book awards). In that period, a committee led by Vice President Angela Sims reviewed these programs to reduce costs (many of which had come out of the AAR's operational budget) while holding fast to our mission and values.

This committee proposed and the board accepted a proposal that preserves all awards while lowering costs. Savings will be achieved primarily by conferring awards in webinars or at the June online meeting. (Formerly, awards had been conferred at the November meeting, with the AAR covering the awardees' transportation and lodging.) The Excellence Awards (Cannon Award for Teaching, Cone Award for Mentoring, and Mamiya Award for Public Service) were instituted with the intention that they be endowed. However, because the endowments have not yet been generated, the awards were being paid through the AAR's operational budget. Going forward, we will offer these awards on a three-year rotation, which will give supporters time to generate the funds.

We have also created a new grant for public scholarship, and will continue grants that support meeting attendance, regional development, dissertations, and research (both individual and collaborative).

Book awards will be reviewed in 2026.

VI. New Business (Leela Prasad)

No new business was introduced. President Prasad stressed that the AAR Board and staff welcome members to share your thoughts, questions and concerns with us.

The Annual Business Meeting was adjourned at 8 p.m. eastern time.

Respectfully submitted
Kathleen Sands
Secretary to the Board of Directors