

MINUTES
AAR Annual Business Meeting
and Ray L. Hart Service Award Presentation
Virtual Meeting
December 3, 2020
6-7 p.m. (all times Eastern)

Executive Director Alice Hunt announced that a quorum was present. (The virtual Annual Meeting system records 77 members present.)

President José Cabezón called the meeting to order at 6:02 p.m.

1. AAR MEMORIAL LIST

Alease Brown 1970-2020
Stanley S. Harakas 1932-2020
Theodore W. Jennings, Jr. 1942-2020
Robert Daniel Kendall 1939-2020
Charles Long 1926-2020
Richard C. Martin 1938-2019
Gregory Sapp 1963-2020
David Shneer 1972-2020
Maria Weems Van Ryn 1980-2019

We remember these colleagues and express our condolences to their families and friends. If we have missed anyone or know of anyone who should be added to the memorial list, please contact AAR Executive Director Alice Hunt (ahunt@aarweb.org).

2. PRESIDENT'S REPORT (José Cabezón)

a. *Context of the 2020 Meeting*

President Cabezón began by acknowledging the global situation we are in at the end of 2020, which is so unusual. He noted that the COVID-19 pandemic overproportionately affects the most vulnerable sectors of society, and that it is right to start by acknowledging this reality, especially the amount of human suffering, loss of life, health, livelihoods, isolation and long-term damage to the social fabric. Also, the context of this year is shaped by raised voices against racial persecution, police violence, and the

persecution of undocumented immigrants. While these persecutions are not new, they have particularly shaped the context of this Annual Meeting. The minutes include this note for the sake of future generations.

b. *Board and Staff Accomplishments*

The board and staff of the AAR have been extremely busy this year. Some of the accomplishments include:

- i. Committee on Professional Conduct: This committee was put into place this year as a 2-year pilot. The first ombudsperson was appointed by the president on an interim basis until elections could be held. Two ombudspersons have now been elected, Katherine Downey and Bobbi Patterson.
- ii. Annual Meeting: Moving the Annual Meeting online was a huge undertaking, and the staff worked very hard to make it happen. They had to negotiate cancelling existing contracts in Boston, then move the entire meeting into a new virtual platform in a very short timeframe. Thanks to Executive Director Alice Hunt and the whole staff for making this happen.
- iii. COVID-19 Crisis Fund: This fund was established to enable small grants of \$500 to those who lost income due to the pandemic. The entire AAR board donated to this fund as did members, President Cabezón expressed gratitude their generosity. In addition, grants from The Luce Foundation were received that allowed for reallocation of funds, enabling two rounds of grants. A total of 66 grants were awarded for 33K. There will be another round of grants awarded in 2021. The AAR also granted 160 Annual Meeting registration fee waivers. Every qualified applicant received the waiver.
- iv. Investment Committee: This committee was established to make recommendations regarding the AAR endowment. The committee, chaired by the AAR Treasurer, has had its first meeting. The allocation of funds seems proper at this point.
- v. Presidential Futures Task Force: This task force was created to advise the board in light of changes to higher education, religious studies, and the AAR in light of the pandemic and its wide-spread economic and social effects. We are in a unique place in history in higher education, major impacts are already felt. This task force is chaired by Kathryn McClymond. They will give interim reports to board, and issue a final report at the end of 2 years. Members may give information to the task force via the website.

- vi. Public Statements and Advocacy: The AAR Board has issued a number of statements this year on a number of issues affecting the membership and society at large. These statements are posted on the website. They include:
 - 1. On the US Executive Order “Combatting Anti-Semitism” (12/18/2019)
 - 2. On the Situation in India in the Wake of the Citizen Amendment Act (1/6/2020)
 - 3. AAR Statement on Racism and George Floyd Murder (6/4/2020)
 - 4. AAR Signs Letter to ICE on Ending Visa Exemptions (7/9/2020)
 - 5. AAR Signs Statement on COVID-19, Role of Humanities (8/14/2020)
- vii. Letters of Support: The AAR Board also issued letters of support for specific religious studies departments that are under threat at various colleges. Eight of these letters have been sent to date, among them Connecticut College, Illinois Wesleyan University, Buena Vista University, Adrian College, Guilford College, St. Mary’s of Maryland, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and Doane University. In addition, the board will be releasing a general statement on the importance of religious studies that can be used by individual departments to lobby for the importance of the field in this climate of cutbacks and closures.
- viii. Working Groups: The board has an internal working group focused on sustainability. The Hiring, Evaluation, and Promotion Task Force has suspended its work pending the work of the Futures Task Force. Other working groups are underway, which will come into being during President-elect Frederick’s term.

President Cabezón concluded his report by thanking all the volunteers who have served on AAR committees, juries, program units, chairs and all the members of the board all of whom are in this meeting.

3. Treasurer’s Report (Randall Styers)

- a. Treasurer: Randall Styers informed the meeting that he has been enjoying his service in this role, especially working with Nicholé Jefferson, Chief Finance and Administration Officer, and other AAR staff members. He noted the talent on the finance committee and the formation of an investment sub-committee as critical aspects of the financial health of the organization, that both are doing wonderful work on strategic planning for the future.

- b. Pandemic: Styers reported that the pandemic has posed very large challenges. Membership dues and registrations have both suffered. Alice Hunt and the AAR staff worked diligently to transition from the in-person meeting to the virtual meeting with as little financial loss as possible. But enormous uncertainty about the future remains because the impact is still not fully known.
- c. Financial Statements: Styers and Jefferson went over the financial statements, which included comparisons of the fiscal year ending June 30 2019, and the year ending June 30, 2020.
 - i. Comparison: The good news is improvement overall in moving out of substantial deficit. San Diego is a popular location for members, so that helps to show the improvement in revenues.
 - 1. Location: AAR revenue primarily impacted by where the Annual Meeting takes place, meaning participation and related costs for hosting the meeting. Annual Meeting revenue is, on average, 45%, membership 22%. This ratio varies depending on participation levels in the Annual Meeting because members tend to renew in relation to meeting attendance.
 - 2. Operating expenses stayed pretty consistent through the 2019 Annual Meeting.
 - ii. Budget: Budgeting forward is very difficult because of the pandemic and its still unclear impacts, but staff have worked hard to anticipate contingencies.

Treasurer Styers ended his report with deep gratitude to the staff for their diligent and hard work over this difficult period.

4. Executive Director's Report (Alice Hunt)

a. "The AAR means all of us together"

- i. Attendance: Alice Hunt noted that attendance at this Annual Business Meeting was much better than in past years. She thanked the attendees, reminding everyone that the AAR is their organization, and this meeting is their meeting.
- ii. Thanks: She thanked the volunteer leadership in the AAR, pointing out that nothing would be done without those individuals: Board members, committees and juries, program unit chairs and steering

committees and everyone who does the work of the AAR, making the guild and this learned society one of shared ownership. Alice Hunt added that she sees much opportunity for the AAR to lead learned societies in the new era that is emerging in the wake of the pandemic.

- iii. Staff Recognition: The AAR has a staff of fifteen who have been working diligently to make sure that the AAR fulfills its mission. As an example, she told of a pre-Annual Meeting staff meeting that went on long after its scheduled end because staff kept raising questions and ideas about every contingency to ensure a successful Annual Meeting for the members.
- iv. COVID Crisis Fund: She wished to thank every donor to the COVID-19 Crisis Fund.
- v. Pandemic Stories: There are “pandemic stories” on the website, posted by members regarding their experiences through this period. Alice Hunt encouraged everyone to look at them.

b. Initiatives

Although José Cabezón named a number of new initiatives the AAR has undertaken this year, Hunt listed a few more:

- 1. Website: The new website and member database were rolled out this year. The new database platform allows for greater flexibility and use by members, including community formation and networking.
- 2. Paper Proposal System: A new paper-proposal system is coming. She noted that if Robert Puckett, Chief Scholarly Engagement Officer, approves of the new system, it is guaranteed to be better than the old one.
- 3. Best Practices: Hunt has been implementing best practices across the organization including staff, committees, and board. Part of the best practices work is in transparency on committees, with annual budgets, nomination processes, input opportunities, etc.
- 4. Program Books: The vast majority of old program books going back many years have now been digitized. They are available in the Pitts Theology Library at Emory University, or on the AAR website.
- 5. Year-Round Programming: There will be more and more year-round programming (webinars, in-service teaching events, etc.) available to members. This has occurred this year in part because

of the pandemic when, for example, the Teaching and Learning Committee sponsored webinars on anti-racism and remote teaching, but more year-round programming is now a goal of the organization in providing benefits to members. Hunt invited ideas about year-round programming that the organization might pursue, and asked for emails with suggestions. ahunt@aarweb.org

6. Health Insurance: Hunt reported that she is still trying to find a way to offer health insurance for people who don't have institutional health insurance. She has been part of the American Council on Learned Societies conversation on this topic, which especially affects contingent faculty. Somebody has to make these kinds of changes, she pointed out, and the AAR is at the front of the issue. On a related note, she said that learned societies in general must begin now to reimagine themselves, because nothing will be the same, looking forward.
7. Regional Meetings: Work with the SBL continues around the topic of regional meetings and the need for better integrating those meetings in everything the AAR does.

Hunt concluded her report by reminding the attendees that the members are the AAR, and encouraged them to reach out to the staff. She thanked the meeting attendees for "being the AAR."

5. Ray L. Hart Service Award (José Cabezón)

President Cabezón presented the Ray L. Hart Service Award to Elias Bongmba.

The Ray L. Hart Service Award is given annually in honor of one of the founding members of the AAR. President Cabezón mentioned how often Ray Hart's name came up in his study of the program books of the past. Hart was also editor of *JAAR* for many years.

Elias Bongmba, the 2020 recipient of the Hart Award, is the Harry & Hazel Chavanne Chair in Christian Theology and chair of the Religion Department at Rice University. His areas of expertise include Global Christianity, African and African-Diaspora Religions, and Contemporary Christian Theology and Ethics. He has written influential books on African witchcraft, comparative hermeneutics, ethics, and literature, among other topics. In 2007 Dr. Bongmba received the Franz Fanon Award for Outstanding Book in Caribbean Thought by the Caribbean Philosophical Association for his *Dialectics of Transformation in Africa* (NY: Palgrave, 2006).

Professor Bongmba's record of service goes far beyond the wall of the academy. He has advised church leaders, government officials and academic heads in his native Cameroon and across the African continent. He is the editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Religion in Africa* (Brill) and has served as president of the African Association for the Study of Religion. He has served the AAR on a variety of steering committees over the years.

President Cabezón congratulated Elias Bongmba on this award and invited him to give some comments.

Dr. Bongmba thanked the board, staff and members of the AAR for this award. He appreciated the support of his deans at Rice who made his many trips to Africa possible, and his colleagues on both continents who have helped to grow the study of religion in Africa. He particularly noted the care he experienced from AAR staff. "The elders who have come before tell us," he said, "the AAR is the best place to be, all of the contacts that have made our work grow and that give us something to say in areas where an encouraging word is needed." He concluded by saying "I accept this award on behalf of all of my colleagues at Rice and in Africa."

6. 2020 Board Election (José Cabezón)

- a. Four members are rotating off of the board at the conclusion of the Annual Meeting. President Cabezón expressed thanks on behalf of the AAR for their work. They are:

1. Kimberly Rae Connor (Secretary)
2. Kerry Danner (Contingent Faculty Director)
3. Katherine Downey (Regions Director)
4. José Cabezón (President).

Alice Hunt added thanks for his wonderful, calm leadership through a tumultuous year.

Cabezón thanked to the board for making his presidency so fulfilling.

- b. Four new members were introduced, along with elected ombudspersons

1. Amir Hussain, Vice President
2. Laurel Schneider, Secretary
3. Nicole Kirk, Contingent Faculty Director
4. Brian Pennington, Regions Director
5. Bobbi Patterson, Ombudsperson
6. Katherine Downey, Ombudsperson

7. Presidential Theme

President Cabezón reminded the meeting that this year's presidential theme is the AAR as a Scholarly Guild, and most of his sessions will take place on Sunday, and one on Monday.

8. Adjournment

- a. President Cabezón completed his last official act as president by passing the gavel to Marla Frederick, President-Elect.
- b. The Annual Business Meeting was adjourned at 6:56 P.M. EST

Respectfully Submitted
Laurel C. Schneider, Vanderbilt University
Secretary