



## **AAR BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING**

Saturday, September 12, 2020 12:00 pm – 5:00 pm EST

Present: (Board Members) Whitney Bauman, José Cabezón, Kimberly Connor, Kerry Danner, Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Marla Frederick, Amir Hussain, Zayn Kassam, Aarti Patel, Mayra Rivera, Randall Styers, Alice Hunt; Absent: Kathy Downey; (AAR Staff Members) Elizabeth Hardcastle, Nicholé Jefferson, Robert Puckett, Dorrie Toney.

President Cabezón issued a Call to Order at 12:04 p.m. EST.

### **Motion 1: Approve agenda. Passed unanimously**

#### **President's Report (Cabezón):**

President Cabezón began with a mention of the Professional Conduct Policy implemented this year and discussed the identification and election of ombudspersons.

He discussed the Annual Meeting. He singled out and thanked Chief Scholarly Engagement Officer, Robert Puckett, and the rest of the AAR staff for their agility and creativity in moving the meeting online. He also thanked Executive Director Alice Hunt for deftly dealing with all the legal and financial consequences in a way that did the least harm to the organization.

President Cabezón described the COVID-19 emergency fund for members, supported by the Luce Foundation as well as other donors. The AAR will have made two rounds of awards chosen by lottery, helping approximately 200 members. There was 100% participation of the board in contributing to this relief fund.

President Cabezón spoke of leading the AAR to constitute an Investment Committee with a wide range of talented members across sectors to advise on investment and other financial strategies. The Investment Committee has met once already.

President Cabezón reminded the board that he had convened the Futures Task Force to advise the Board in light of the changes in higher ed and profession brought on by the pandemic and other cultural shifts that shape the guild and how we see ourselves. The task force will run for two years and bring updates and a final report. Chaired by Kathryn McClymond, members of the board on the Task Force include Mayra Rivera, Randall Styers, Amir Hussain, and Aarti Patel.

He informed the board that most of his presidential appointments to committees are complete. He discussed the board's statements in response to recent events. He further indicated, given recent closures of religion departments, we should make a broad statement about the importance of departments of religious studies, using resources from the committees and prior statements on the issue. To date, five departments have been threatened with closure. The presidential line has sent several advocacy letters. President Cabezón suggests we continue this advocacy, some of which has received national attention.

President Cabezón noted that the presidential line has established written procedures for the executive director annual review process.

He reminded the board of his Presidential theme: *The AAR as a Scholarly Guild*. He announced his plenaries to align with that theme:

*Telling the Truth of Our Lives: Intersectional Coalition Building as Scholars, Educators, and Activists*

*The AAR as a Crucible for New Fields*

*What Do We, as Scholars of Religion, Value?*

*The Changing Field of Religious Studies: A Short History of the American Academy of Religion's Annual Meeting*

His presidential address will be titled: *The Study of Buddhism in the AAR*

## **Executive Director's Report (Hunt)**

Executive Director Hunt began with a reminder of our AAR values: academic excellence and professional responsibility; free inquiry and critical examination; diversity and inclusion; respect and transparency.

She introduced Dorrie Toney, our new Public Engagement Officer, noting she has already played a critical role in launching the website and brand and is working on a Public Engagement Plan for the organization. Toney described her extensive and varied professional background and her education in the field and how they prepared her for the role at the AAR. She hopes AAR will be more of a portal that links our access resources so that the AAR is where the public should come to improve their understanding of religion.

Executive Director Hunt noted the addition to the staff of Jill Marshall as Publications and Communications Coordinator. She noted we have not hired for the Advocate for the Study of Religion position; neither have we posted the Research and Data position. Research Fellow Josh Patterson has continued in his role.

We paused to remember members who have passed since the last Annual Meeting:

Stanley S. Harakas  
Theodore W. Jennings, Jr.  
Robert Daniel Kendall  
Charles H. Long  
Richard C. Martin  
Maria Weems Van Ryn

Executive Director Hunt provided more detail on the COVID-19 relief grants.

As an update on the Luce grant, she noted the work was to begin in January and preliminary work indeed began then. However, some aspects were delayed due to the pandemic. She coordinated with Luce to adapt the work. Luce agreed to do an initial reallocation of \$220,000 to meet needs arising from the pandemic. An additional reallocation may be forthcoming.

She highlighted some internal organizational accomplishments around AAR committees: a more inclusive and transparent nomination process for presidential appointments to committees; a more simplified process for presidential committee appointments; a move toward clarified roles of staff liaisons; the addition of non-annual

meeting budget established for each committee to give them more agency and year-round programming.

Other less noticeable accomplishments of the staff include:

- PAPERS being updated to make it more secure. She noted that the PAPERS system is home-grown, expensive, and cumbersome. We will be moving to an off-the-shelf system that will be integrated with our new association management system (membership database).
- Standard Operating Procedures have been established. Additional SOPs are in the works.
- Robert Puckett and the Annual Meeting team are to be commended for their excellent adaptive work given the unusual circumstances of the year.
- A Two-Year Tactical Plan, including timelines and measurable outcomes, was developed based on the collaborative work of the entire AAR staff.
- Responses on behalf of distressed departments has been, and continues to be, crucial to our work.

Among the items requiring additional attention, we find:

- Health insurance for membership efforts have been unsuccessful so far but that work continues. Hunt hopes that, perhaps in collaboration with the ACLS organizations, something can be done.
- Ongoing concerns for contingent members as we see increasing vulnerability.
- Year-round programming to benefit our members
- Public Engagement plan is forthcoming
- Remaining open positions need attention as pandemic exposes vulnerabilities in the organization.
- Fundraising should be prioritized but with a new plan that is responsive to current context.
- Working on internal communication issues among staff and between members.

Executive Director Hunt closed her report by raising issues constantly weighing on her mind. She noted the Futures Task Force will attend to many, if not most, of these issues but cautioned that we must not rely solely on the task force to address these critical issues. She reminded the board of our opportunity to provide leadership.

- 1) The umbrella piece - The larger cultural issues (BlackLivesMatter, MeToo, Islamophobia, white nationalism, environmental concerns, immigration issues, raging divisions) in combination with the pandemic as expressed in the charge to the Presidential Futures Task Force
- 2) The need to provide support for and have a positive impact on behalf of our more vulnerable members (contingent faculty, students, underemployed members, members of color and other members who are currently marginalized or under attack) and the challenges of creating spaces for positive impact
- 3) The need to be environmentally responsible
- 4) The need for scholarship to be accessible including issues around open access (with all its complexities)
- 5) Diminishing membership numbers
- 6) The opportunities with and complexities of our relationship with SBL
- 7) The use and misuse of religions in public venues
- 8) Diminishing support of departments of religious studies and religion courses accompanied by diminishing support for the humanities
- 9) The many challenges facing higher education institutions and therefore a large portion of our membership

### **Finance Committee's Report (Styers)**

Treasurer Randall Styers reported from the Finance Committee, mentioning the establishment of the Investment Committee, including professional financial advisers among the membership.

The Finance Committee discussed the proposed budget and how it is shaped by the uncertainty the organization is facing which affects all aspects of the organization's financial health.

Chief Finance and Administration Officer Nichol  Jefferson guided the board through the details of the budget and the challenges of trying to do so with accuracy. Timelines shaped by the pandemic affected the budget process, primarily the Annual Meeting revenue streams. The Finance Committee chose to be conservative with respect to revenue projections. Competing priorities and diminished resources will lead future Boards to make difficult decision.

### **Motion 2: To Approve proposed budget for fiscal year 2021**

**Unanimously passed.**

### **Items of Note:**

**Program Committee Nominations (Hunt):** Executive Director Hunt encouraged the Board to nominate people to serve on the Program Committee following the process we implemented last year. The Board, the Program Committee, and Program Unit chairs can make nominations. The Executive Committee selects the slate. Program Unit chairs then vote to elect the new Program Committee members.

**Hiring, Evaluation, and Promotion Task Force Update (Frederick):** President-elect Marla Frederick reported for the task force. Two subgroups were formed, one focused on best practices around promotion; the second worked on the idea of a life cycle of a religion scholar—graduate school, career paths, retirement. Much of the work involved data compilation, especially as found among other ALCS organizations. Some of this work may become irrelevant or out of date due to changes wrought by the pandemic. The Futures Task Force can take what the HEP task force has developed already and apply to what comes next. The HEP task force work is on hold for now.

**Futures Task Force Update (Rivera): Vice-president** Mayra Rivera reported, on behalf of Futures Task Force chair Kathryn McClymond, that the task force is just getting off the ground. She invited the board members to contribute their ideas for what should be topics for the Futures Task Force consideration. The task force is currently gathering information from the AAR members, AAR committees, AAR program units, and AAR RSOs about the issues of highest concern in two dimensions: internal to the AAR and external to membership and public.

**Status Committees Mentoring Program (Kassam):** Status Committee Director Zayn Kassam reported that 24 applications for mentoring were received and reviewed by a subcommittee which developed a successful process for identifying appropriate members to serve as mentors. She hopes in the future we can reach more of the membership to take advantage of this program.

**IAHR Congress Report (Puckett):** Chief Scholarly Engagement Officer Robert Puckett serves as our liaison to the IAHR, an umbrella organization for other organizations like the AAR across the world. The IAHR annual meeting was cancelled because a virtual option did not provide for the full range of planned programming that was site specific. They are still planning some online events and webinars. Our representatives participated in the IAHR election process.

**Committee on Professional Conduct Update (Downey):** Executive Director Hunt provided the update in CPC chair Downey's absence. She reminded the board that the

Professional Conduct Policy that began its 2-year pilot implementation in January of 2020. Two complaints are currently being handled.

**Grants and Awards (Hunt):** Executive Director Hunt called the board's attention to those members who have received grants and awards, including the Ray L. Hart award.

## **BREAK**

**Appointments to Committees of the Board (Cabezón):** President Cabezón recognized those appointments needed at this time. Committees of the Board appointments differ from the presidential appointments to standing committees. Appointments to committees of the board (with the exception of the Program Committee appointments) come from the Executive Committee and are presented to the board:

The Finance Committee needs a member to replace Fred Glennon, who is rotating off this year. The board and the staff thank Dr. Glennon for his service. Donna Bowman agreed to serve.

The Governance and Leadership Development Committee also will need a new member. Jin L. Park is rotating off after serving an extra year to provide continuity and create rotation stability. The board and the staff thank Dr. Park for her service. Kathryn McClymond has agreed to serve.

**Hart Service Award Criteria (Cabezón):** In the last few years, questions have been raised, when the Executive Committee deliberated about who should receive the Ray L. Hart Service Award, about the criteria for making the award. The board considered a revision to the language around the award so that it specifically recognizes service to the AAR guild rather than to the broader field of Religious Studies. Currently the award reads:

*given to persons whose dedication and service have made significant contributions to the AAR's mission to foster excellence in the academic study of religion and enhance the public understanding of religion.*

During the discussion, the board considered the possibility of an additional service award recognizing a member's contribution to the public understanding of religion, the AAR's mission, and those whose service is not traditionally recognized. President Cabezón will work with a small group to develop a broader service award criteria and language around a possible additional award.

**Motion 3: To change the language of the Hart Service Award to read:**

*The Ray L. Hart Service Award, established by the Board of Directors in 1992, is given to persons whose dedication and continuing efforts of service to the AAR have been exemplary.*

**Passed unanimously.**

**Sustainability Working Group Update (Rivera):** Vice President Rivera described the work of the committee (Rivera, Bauman, Connor) to assess current practices, to investigate what other ALCS organizations are doing around sustainability; to explore next steps to address sustainability. The working group asked the board to consider their recommendations and discussed the information presented for consideration and feedback which includes alliances with already established groups and structures. AAR staff will work on an implementation timeline.

**Annual Meeting Update (Puckett):** Chief Scholarly Engagement Officer Robert Puckett walked the board through all the changes to the Annual Meeting that have been necessitated by the pandemic.

**Additional:** President Cabezón mentioned that he hopes to initiate an archival project that would include narratives of how people made their ways in the fields of religious studies. He invited Board members to participate in generating this idea.

**Executive Session (Cabezón):** The board discussed the executive director's annual review, her self-reflection, the results of staff and board surveys, and commend the executive director on her work during extraordinary times. The month of January has been set for the executive director's annual review, commencing in January of 2022.

**Adjournment:** The meeting was adjourned at 4:01 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Kimberly Rae Connor,



Secretary