

American Academy of Religion
AAR Board of Directors Meeting
June 10-11, 2023

M I N U T E S

June 10 Session I: 9AM – 5PM

Board Members Present: Amir Hussain, Whitney Bauman, Sabina Ali, Jin Y. Park, Leela Prasad, Dena Pence, Thelathia Nikki Young, Nicole Kirk, Laurel Schneider, Alice Hunt

Staff Present: Nichol  Franklin, Amy Defibaugh

I. Call to Order 9:06 AM EST, Saturday, June 10, 2023

II. Approval of Minutes of the January Meeting

The January 2023 Minutes were approved.

III. President’s Report

President Amir Hussain opened the meeting with a brief review of the Executive Director search process and thanked the members of the Search Committee for their hard work in a condensed timeframe.

He announced that an award and gift for Alice Hunt is forthcoming and opened the floor for comments in appreciation of her contributions to the AAR during her tenure as Executive Director. The members of the Board each spoke about her leadership, mentoring, commitments to diversity and to the staff, and her support of the organization through the pandemic. The Board gave her a standing ovation.

President Hussain then reported on his work with the staff on the Annual Meeting. The theme is La Labor de Nuestras Manos (The Work of our Hands) with three plenary panels planned:

- constructive Muslim theology.
- the work of our hands beyond the academy.
- The Moon On My Uniform (documentary film about Muslim chaplains in the US military).

IV. Treasurer’s Report

Dena Pence reviewed the financial reports. Fiscal Year 2023 are projections for AM revenue assume an 80% attendance of our last full in-person meeting (2019). Nichol 

reported that we came very close to hitting that 80% goal in 2022. This put revenue projections in line with the reality of the meeting revenue.

2023 has had anomalies based on changes in the market, which continues to fluctuate and create some uncertainty in endowment income. However, projections of expenses for 2023 have played out as expected thus far. The final reports are still being completed.

Our drawdown policy is 5% from endowed funds. To have a \$0 balanced budget projection, we will have to draw more than 5%. Going forward, we will have to think very hard about how to do trade-offs rather than additions in cost-bearing programs.

Nicole Kirk noted that some other non-profit organizations consider 5% draw to be too high for sustainability and are shifting to policies of 4% draw or less.

Although expenses from AM are still too preliminary to report, Nichol  Franklin thinks that they will come in close to budget. The treasurer’s summary report is attached as [Appendix A](#).

MOTION I

The Finance Committee moved to accept the 2024 budget with acknowledgement that it will likely involve a draw above the 5% policy to cover operating expenses.

The motion passed.

V. Executive Director’s Report

The Board evaluation of Standing Committees is now a priority. Self-evaluations of all committees are available. Hopefully the Executive Committee can bring recommendations to the Board in September.

Alice Hunt discussed the work of the staff since January, noting that the Executive Director Search process required some board-related work, such as the evaluation of the standing committees, be delayed until that process was complete. The Board will review those reports and meet in July to discuss them.

She noted the work already in progress to replace our association management system (AMS), which contains our membership database, and therefore our website. The Microsoft system we are using now is expensive and has not delivered as promised.

As this is her last meeting with the Board as outgoing Executive Director, Alice read a statement to the Board and requested that it be included in the Minutes. The full text of her statement is included as [Appendix B](#).

VI. Graduate Student Committee Proposal

An ad hoc committee was formed to evaluate the current structure of the Graduate Student Committee comprised of the current Student Director Sabina Ali, the Regions Director Brian Pennington, and staff Director of Membership Matt Vieson. The Student Director chairs the committee, and student representatives from all of the regions sit on it. Issues facing the regions more generally have meant that it has been too difficult to fill the committee, resulting in too much work for too few student representatives. The Ad Hoc committee is therefore bringing a proposal to the board that includes changing the term of service for the Student Director from two to three years and simplifying the student membership of the committee. The term change will require a change to the by-laws and a subsequent vote by the membership at the Annual Business Meeting in November. (See [Appendix C](#) for the complete proposal.)

Student Director Sabina Ali wished for credit to be given to Matt Vieson for recognizing these problems and proposing possible solutions.

MOTION 2

The Ad Hoc Committee moved to modify the structure of the Graduate Student Committee as follows:

- a. Disconnect appointment to the Graduate Student Committee from Regional Student Director appointments.**
- b. Restructure appointments to six members for staggered three-year terms.**
- c. Make appointments through the regular AAR committee appointment process.**

The motion passed.

MOTION 3

The Ad Hoc Committee moved to amend the AAR By-Laws such that a Student Director shall serve a term of three years and may not serve an additional consecutive term as Student Director.

The motion passed.

MOTION 4 (moved by Dena Pence, seconded by Whitney Bauman)

If the bylaws changes are approved in the Annual Business Meeting in November, the newly elected Student Director will serve under the new bylaws for a 3-year term.

The motion passed.

VII. Program Committee Report

Whitney Bauman gave the Program Committee report. The committee has conducted two meetings since January Board Meeting.

- a. Subcommittees:
 - i. The Handbook committee has continued work on handbooks for new members and program unit chair handbooks to address transition issues of staff and committee membership, and to increase fairness of Program Committee work.
 - ii. The Proliferation Subcommittee is looking at the overall number of units and sessions at the annual meeting. With 160 program units just in the AAR, the issue of proliferation will require new thinking about the size and scope of the AM. The subcommittee hopes to bring proposals for discussion in the coming year.
 - iii. Addressing Sexual Harassment sub-committee: working on ways to address and deal with the ongoing problem at the annual meeting.
- b. An online AAR meeting “the summer session” will pilot June 2025. The Program Committee recommends calling the online and in-person Meetings the “Summer Session” and “Fall Session”.
- c. The 2023 Annual Meeting schedule draft is complete: There are 543 program unit sessions and receptions. RSO and affiliate sessions will be scheduled in July.
- d. Annual Meeting items to note:
 - i. Prior to the AM, we will be offering 2-3 weeks of professional development sessions online with Beyond the Professoriate, tailored for religion scholars. Also, sessions for members navigating their first Annual Meeting. One of the most common poll responses afterward has been that the meeting is overwhelming.
 - ii. Texas-specific issues. The Program Committee and affiliated staff are working to make present the absence of trans and other at risk members.

VIII. Executive Director Search Report

Jin Park, Chair of the Search Committee for the Executive Director, gave a report and led a discussion on the timing, process, and work of the search committee that resulted in a recommendation. The Search Committee was comprised of the members of the Executive Committee (Amir Hussain, Jin Park, Leela Prasad, Dena Pence, Laurel Schneider) and the Status Committee Director, Thelathia Nikki Young.

MOTION 5

The search committee moved that the board approve its final recommendation and proceed with an offer.

The motion passed.

June 10 Session II: 9AM–12PM

Board Members Present: Amir Hussain, Whitney Bauman, Sabina Ali, Jin Y. Park, Leela Prasad, Dena Pence, Thelathia Nikki Young, Nicole Kirk, Laurel Schneider, Alice Hunt

Staff Present: Nichol  Franklin, Elizabeth Hardcastle

IX. BYLAWS

Elizabeth Hardcastle presented proposed corrections and clarification changes needed in the bylaws.

MOTION 6

Dena Pence moved to approve the changes as presented in the by-laws, seconded by Nicole Kirk and to forward them for a vote to the Membership at the Annual Business Meeting in November.

The motion passed.

X. SBL RELATIONSHIP

Nichol  Franklin made a presentation about the AAR/SBL Tenancy in Common Agreement as pertains to the Luce Center and discussed the division of Annual Meetings labor between the two organizations.

Alice Hunt made a presentation about the AAR/SBL Common Conventions Agreement and discussed the working relationship.

XI. REGIONS

Nichol  Franklin reported work with Brian Pennington on structural and operational changes needed in the regions due to changes in leadership and activity among regions. Also, since the SBL has dissolved its regional entities, this has created an opportunity to think about the AAR regions and to solicit from them self-evaluations.

The Mid-Atlantic and New England/Maritimes regions LLC have thus requested to merge and form a new LLC called Northeastern LLC.

MOTION 7

Whitney Bauman moved to approve the dissolution of the Mid-Atlantic and of the New England/Maritimes regions and to create a new regional entity named Northeastern Region LLC. Dena Pence seconded the motion.

The motion passed.

XII. AWARDS

Alice reminded the Board that it had tabled evaluation work to be done on the AAR Awards, and that this item should be taken up again once a new Executive Director is named with Elizabeth Hardcastle, Governance Specialist, serving as staff liaison to the board's ad hoc committee comprised of Board Members Leela Prasad (chair), Amir Hussain, Nicole Kirk, and Dena Pence.

XIII. The meeting adjourned at 11:51 am EST.

Respectfully submitted,
Laurel C. Schneider, Secretary

APPENDIX A: Summary Treasurer's report



Treasurer's Report

June 2023

FY2023

For the 2023 fiscal year, AAR approached its fiscal planning based on assumptions that revenues and expenses related to the annual meeting and membership dues would potentially return to 80% of our actuals in a pre-pandemic year, in this case we used 2019 as our baseline. Our budget planning included plans to execute a traditional in-person annual meeting in November 2022 in Denver, Colorado.

The following tables illustrate the attendance and revenue variances between the 2019 (FY20) and 2022 (FY23) Annual Meetings:

Actual attendance variances:

	2019 – San Diego	2022 – Denver	% Difference
AAR only	4444	3397	76%
SBL only	3927	3147	80%
Dual	1056	700	66%
Total Attendance	9489	7261	77%

Actual AAR revenue variance

Revenue	2019 – San Diego	2022 - Denver	\$ Variance	% Variance
AM Registration	\$920,306	\$796,925	(\$123,381)	87%
Membership	\$656,499	\$603,049	(\$53,450)	92%

These variances confirm our budget projections and cause us to anticipate that our actual income from the Annual Meeting will fall within an acceptable range of our projected budget. Actual meeting revenues and expenses, however, are still being processed and therefore final actuals are not yet available.

As of the date of this report, FY2023 interim financials show a net deficit of \$44,984. These interim numbers do not reflect the actual and final financial position for the fiscal year as the year has not ended and we are still actively capturing and posting revenues and expenses across all cost centers.

As is consistent from year to year, we continue to anticipate fluctuations in the market value of our investment portfolio as the stock market continues to respond to wide-ranging economic forecasts. As of April 30, 2023, the total market value of our investment portfolio is \$7,221,153 which represents a \$212,194 decline in asset value since the end of 2022. During the fiscal year, the market has experienced a wide variety of fluctuations and it is anticipated that these ups and downs will continue until the market stabilizes.

APPENDIX B

Alice Hunt's Statement to the Board

It has been an honor and privilege to serve as executive director of our guild organization for the last five years. We are in quite a different place today than we were five years ago – some differences we expected and some we did not. We have accomplished many of the things we set out to accomplish. And we have run into challenges of which we had no way of conceiving in 2018. There are some priorities that I want you to keep before you even as you move to new staff leadership.

Values

We have a clear commitment to our collective AAR values:

- Respect and Transparency
- Academic Excellence and Professional Responsibility
- Diversity and Inclusion
- Free Inquiry and Critical Examination

Our understanding of the AAR

To remind you of the stance you, as the board, adopted in 2022 - the AAR creates and holds space. The AAR is a member organization. The AAR (as an organization) is not itself a producer of scholarship on religion. Instead, the organization connects its members with each other by providing spaces for interaction, networking, and collaboration. Such connections provide opportunities for expanding and enhancing the members' scholarship, teaching, professional development, advocacy, and public engagement. By facilitating the creation of such spaces of engagement and collaboration, the AAR supports the work of all members in our rich diversity. The organization relies on the expertise of its members when it is necessary to provide insight to address issues affecting the study of religion.

We are a membership organization – collection of scholars. These scholars are not our clients – they are our membership. We ALL are the AAR. We've talked many times about how "the AAR" is referenced – "I'm going to the AAR." or "The AAR needs to..." What does that mean? The board? The staff? The committees? Who is "the AAR?" We are a membership organization – we ALL are the AAR. We need to be consistent with and enhance our narrative and communication around this clarification.

We need to understand that our organization was likely founded and structured for full professors with tenure. Our times are different. Today only 22% of our membership is tenured. (An additional 11% is tenure-track.) We need to continually grapple with what that means for the organization.

We need to continually consider who we serve. One of my commitments when I came was to centralize in the life of the organization the concerns of our status committees. For me, it was (and is) unacceptable to experience a challenge around race or gender or disability or sexual

orientation and think that we have a designated committee to handle those concerns. Those concerns are central to the lifeblood of the organization. Did we get far enough on this journey toward centralizing these concerns during my tenure? No. We made some progress but we need to keep moving in this direction.

Complicating all of this – we need to stay mindful that our field has changed. We need to continue pondering the AAR’s role in addressing these changes. We need to ask ourselves what role and responsibility the organization has in addressing needed changes in Ph.D. curricula in the study of religion. We need to ponder how we should help our colleagues teaching and leading in the Ph.D. granting institutions understand that just doing things the way we have always done them may have severe consequences.

The Board’s Work

We made a great deal of progress in spending board energy appropriately. In particular, I am thinking here about putting processes in place so that we don’t over-react to the voices of a few (or even a few hundred) members (and non-members) who are upset about something or making demands we cannot meet. Concurrently, of course, we should take ownership when we make mistakes. At any rate, I want to encourage you to continue to be conscientious about how you as a board spend your time and energy in service of our mission.

We have worked hard (and well) to maintain appropriate boundaries with the board’s responsibility being strategic and fiduciary and the executive director’s responsibility being management while supporting you in your strategic and fiduciary roles. I raise this to encourage you to stay within your roles and responsibilities. We have done that well. I also know that it might be easy, in your eagerness to support your new executive director, to stray over those lines.

With regard to your strategic responsibilities, for the last few years we have talked at almost every meeting about the strategic questions facing our organization. I have included that list with your board materials as you will want to consider some of those questions going forward. I have also included a list of important fiduciary questions for you.

The Staff

Before my final comment, I want you to know that we have an excellent staff in place. These folks are professional and proficient. They are enthusiastic about our mission and our work. Know that the nuts and bolts of our work rests in capable hands.

Our Guild

Finally, I’d like to remind you of some important powers we have. At one point in my life, I thought all power was bad. That was somewhat naïve. Power is a fact. It is. What you do with power is what matters. We have a number of powers that we can deploy in service of our mission and values. So, I invite you to “think like a scholarly society.” When we think like a scholarly society, there is an opportunity to appreciate the superpowers we have as distinct from

universities, libraries, and other cultural organizations: we have a space making power - a convening power (to bring people together to exchange research, celebrate accomplishments, support professional development, strengthen community ties); we have a standard-setting power (for rigorous scholarship as well as responsible professional conduct), we have the power of voice (together we can amplify our voices with greater authority and influence than by ourselves); and we have the power of illumination (to put the spotlight on the important work that we do. Thank you for your role in stepping into the power of our powers.

Thank you.

APPENDIX C

AAR Graduate Student Committee Proposal for New Formation

Matt Vieson, Brian Pennington, Sabina Ali

(adapted by Alice Hunt for June 2023 Board of Directors meeting)

Current formation of the Graduate Student Committee

- Student Director from AAR Board of Directors
- Student Director of each region (10 total)

Some regions are in the process of combining/disbanding o Some regions are presently without a Student Director

Issues

- The current Graduate Student Committee (GSC) is not engaged
- Many don't realize that when they become a Graduate Student Director at the regional level it means they automatically become a member of the GSC
- It's too much work to be responsible for graduate student programming at the regional level and at the AAR organizational level

Recommendations

- Discontinue the practice of having regional Student Directors automatically become members of the GSC
- Appoint members to the GSC just like other committee appointments (open call for nominations, feedback from committee chairs, appointment by current AAR president)
- Set the number of members for the new GSC to 6 members
- Term of office: three years, non-renewable

Goals

Note: the AAR Student Director currently only serves two years

- § Recommendation: Increase term of AAR Student Director to three years to help with continuity
- § That would require an amendment to the AAR Bylaws
- Have a more engaged GSC that is eager to address graduate student issues and work on programming for the AM
- Allow regional Student Directors to focus more of their attention on programming for regional meetings
- More interaction between the AAR Graduate Student Director and Regions Director
- More interaction between new GSC and regional Graduate Student Directors

POTENTIAL MOTIONS for the AAR Board of Directors, June 2023

1. 1) Modify the structure of the Graduate Student Committee as follows:
 - a. Disconnect appointment to GSC from regional student director appointments
 - b. 6 members appointed for staggered three-year terms
 - c. Appointments made through the regular AAR committee appointment process
2. 2) Amend the AAR Bylaws as follows:

A Student Director shall serve a term of three years and may not serve an additional consecutive term as Student Director.