

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF RELIGION  
Board of Directors Meeting  
January 27-28, 2024  
Atlanta, GA

**MINUTES**

Day 1

January 27, 2024, convened at 9 a.m., EST.

**Board members present:** Jin Y. Park, Thelathia Nikki Young, Laurel Schneider, Dena Pence, Darla Schumm; Ann Gleig; Ristina Gooden; Patrick Reyes; Claudia Schippert; Kathleen Sands.

**Staff Present:** Nichol  Franklin (CFO/COO, for Treasurer’s and Regions Reports)

I. Welcome and Call to Order (President Jin Park).

II. Agenda approved by acclamation.

III. **MOTION I**

**Approve the minutes of Business Meeting of November 2023.**

**Motion approved unanimously**, with the following correction to items 7d and 7e: strike Sunday, change to Saturday.

IV. **President’s Report (Jin Park).**

- a. **The Presidential line** visited all the standing committees during the Annual Meeting. Doing so was helpful for both sides of the visit. Doing so was beneficial on both sides.
- b. **The presidential theme and plenaries for 2024.** The theme is “Violence, Non-violence, and the Margin.” One plenary session will be held in June and the other two in November in San Diego.
- c. **San Antonio meeting planned for 2029** – 50 members wrote a letter calling upon the AAR/SBL leadership to cancel this venue based on concern that anti-abortion laws in Texas could endanger some meeting participants.
- d. **UNC Greensboro Religious Studies program.** President Park and Executive Director Schippert received letters from chair Greg Grieve asking the AAR to support this program against the imminent threat of closure. Based on the urgency of this request (decision is to be made on Feb. 1<sup>st</sup>) the Executive Committee sent a letter of support, reflecting AAR policy on the value of the academic study of religion. The letter also was made available on the AAR website for members to sign.
- e. **Executive Director’s Report** (Claudia Schippert)
- a. **Staff.** The AAR staff had a recent retreat and is in great shape. We will need a new director of membership, as our current staff person is leaving.
- b. **Membership.** Membership numbers are stable compared to last year, although down in comparison to years past. Membership is tied to annual meeting; as we add year-round programming [YRP], more people will keep up their membership.
- c. **Expanding membership.** ED Schippert hopes to expand membership outside higher educations - e.g., institutional memberships, affiliated memberships.

- d. **Students, contingent faculty, and applied practitioners.** Those who can't afford to renew membership may get support from the AAR (from what used to be the COVID relief fund).
- e. **Public Scholarship Awards.** Luce APS awards are now being evaluated. The awards are being conceived as seed funding so that public facing scholars learn to market their work.
- f. **June meeting.** Planned for the last week of June. Program units will issue one Call for Papers but will have an additional session to plan. June meeting also will have a presidential session and workshops.
- g. **Membership system and website content management.** ED Schippert and staff are reviewing proposals and will soon choose one. The goal is to automate more processes and improve our website.
- h. **Judith Plaskow's induction** into Women's Hall of Fame, sponsored by AAR.

## VI. Treasurer's Report

- a. Dena Pence (Treasurer)
  - i. **Funding and membership.** The AAR's funding depends on the number of its members. Membership now stays at around 5,000, down from about 9,000 a decade ago. Much of our programing and fiscal structure went into place when membership was higher. By February we will know what our new normal is.
  - ii. **A 5- year comparison** of AAR revenues and expenses was reviewed with the BoD.
  - iii. **Contributions.** Only 1% of our revenue is from contributions. We need to increase contributions so that we can draw less from our investments.
  - iv. **Development.** The AAR does not have a strong history of contributions and has no designated development officer. We may need to consider building a development operation.
- b. Nichol  Franklin (CFO/COO)
  - i. **Endowments and investments.** We have a combination of restricted and unrestricted funds as well as some endowments. We also have a portfolio that is shared with the SBL.
 

Truist is our investment manager.
  - ii. **AAR and Emory University.** The AAR is an affiliate of Emory University. Our staff members are Emory employees and have Emory benefits. We must abide by Emory's HR practices and follow their compensation policies (with some room for adjustment within the bands). Nichol  is our HR manager (assigned by Emory). AAR reimburses Emory each month for these costs.
  - iii. **The Luce Center.** This is owned jointly by AAR and SBL which have a tenancy-in-common
 

agreement and a joint fund for support of the building. AAR and SBL jointly manage the Luce center and Emory provides maintenance, security, and some tech operations. There are tenants in the building, and this rental income helps offset cleaning services and other day-to-day needs
  - iv. **Employment Services Website** is also a joint project of the AAR and SBL.

- v. **Diversified investment plan.** Former AAR President Marla Frederick initiated, and the board approved, a plan to ensure that 40% of the AAR's investments would support minority-owned firms. The process of implementing this policy has begun but it is challenging to find enough firms that are minority owned and that can absorb up to 40% of our portfolio. The Board may in the future receive motions from the Finance and Audit Committee to slightly adjustment how we implement this policy.

**VII. Review of Regions (Nicholé Franklin, Staff Liaison for Regions)**

- a. **Regions.** The AAR has had 10 regions until this year. Each is an LLC – a wholly owned subsidiary of the AAR. Each is run by a regionally elected board and holds an annual regional meeting in the spring. Their finances are rolled into the AAR financial report. The AAR is legally liable for the regions.
- b. **AAR work with regions.** Two years ago, Nicholé and Regions Director Brian Pennington began working with regions to redraw regional maps as needed, develop consistent leadership policies across regions, standardize accounts management, and foster board turnover. For these purposes, they drafted a standard operating agreement for regions. Regions have the option of accepting the agreement and continuing on as before, dissolving, merging with another region, or ending affiliation with the AAR. The New England and Mid-Atlantic Regions merged into what is now the Northeast Region. All regions but one have now accepted the operating agreement.
- c. **Regional membership.** Members now can choose the region to which they belong.
- d. **The International Region.** This is a bit of a misnomer because it mainly serves members in Canada. We may need to come up with another region for members from outside North America,

**VIII. Program Committee Report (Ann Gleig, Program Committee Chair)**

The Committee met on January 24 and 25<sup>th</sup> to consider the renewal of program units and RSO's and applications for new RSO's and seminars, to review the AM of 2023, and to plan for online meeting of June 2024.

- a. **Program Unit Reviews.** 35 programs were under review; most received a 5-year renewal.  
Three program units will undergo review next year with the possibility of sunseting: International Development and Religion Unit, Scriptural Reasoning Unit, Sacred Texts and Ethics Unit.
- b. **RSO renewals.** The program committee recommends the renewal of: North American Association for the Study of Religion, Public Religion Research Institute, Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality, International Society for Chinese Philosophy, Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy, Colloquium on Violence and Religion Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, and the Religious Education Association.

**MOTION II**

**To approve the renewal of the above RSO's.**

**Motion approved unanimously.**

- c. **Requests for RSO status.** Program Committee approved the application of the Hymn Society of the U.S. and Canada. It denied the application of the Manchester Wesley

Research Center because it is not an independent organization but supported by a university, which does not fit the RSO requirements.

- d. **Requests to create seminars.** Program Committee approved a seminar on Buddhist Monasticism. It denied the application for a seminar called Publicly-Engaged Scholarship in the Study of Religion, but encouraged reapplication next year with more attention to diversity in leadership and communities to be engaged.
- e. **Suggestion for new membership category.** Program committee recommends that the Board consider a new affiliate/ organizational membership category. ED Schippert is working on new categories of membership and considering costs and benefits.
- f. **Annual meeting of 2023.** Registration numbers: 3320 for AAR; 3182 SBL; 714 dual. Over 200 other events generated about \$48,000, to be split with SBL.
- g. **June meeting.** About 70 program units (over 50%) will participate. Individual participation in the June meeting will not count against the maximum of two times at the November annual meeting. Program Committee is considering whether there could be versions of the exhibit hall and networking opportunities. Registration fee for the June meeting will be on a sliding scale and there will be a discount if a person registers for both Annual Meetings in 2024.

**IX. Discussion of letter regarding San Antonio venue for 2029 (Park, Schippert).**

- a. **Background.** President Park recounted interactions with members who objected to the San Antonio venue in 2023. BoD response to this is on the AAR website. The new letter, from members of both the AAR and SBL, says that unless we cancel our contract with San Antonio for 2029, they will disrupt the meeting. Any decision on this matter must be agreed to by both the AAR and the SBL.
- b. **Options and Financial Implications.** Executive Director Schippert estimated that cancellation of the 2029 meeting would cost \$160-\$197K, split with the SBL. (This includes cancellation fees for the conference center, hotels, and Maritz Global Events.) If we shift to another venue, we would not incur Maritz cancellation fees, but would incur their additional labor costs. Conference center costs would be greatly increased in comparison with the San Antonio Conference Center, which is offering us (in concessions) all but about \$8K of its roughly \$350K fee. We would have to increase registration fees, which could trigger a decrease in registration numbers. Hotel rooms would be roughly 30% more than San Antonio rooms. If we have fewer attendees and use fewer rooms than reserved, the hotels will charge us for the minimum room blocks contracted.
- c. **Meeting proposed.** Apart from the question of cancellation, the BoD would like to discuss with the letter-writers our shared ethical concern about the issues raised. As a general principle, the AAR should support endangered communities in any venue we visit. The AAR might consult with pertinent groups on the ground as to what course of action they recommend. We might also consult with AAR leadership in the region of the venue – in this case, the Southwest region.

**X. Strategic Planning Process and Task Force (Vice President Schneider).**

**Composition.** Laurel Schneider will chair. Other members: Angela Sims (AAR Finance and Audit Committee), Emilie Townes (former President), Brian Pennington (former Regions Director), Claudia Schippert (AAR-ED), Nichole Franklin (AAR-CFO/COO), Amy Defibaugh (AAR-Director of Programming and Publications). One or two additional members TBD.

### **MOTION III**

to approve a Task Force on Strategic Planning charged to develop a strategic plan for the AAR that is consistent with the mission statement and is focused on sustainability, fiscal responsibility, and organizational health in a rapidly changing educational environment.

**Motion approved unanimously.**

Meeting adjourned at 3:40 p.m

### **Day 2**

The Board reconvened on January 28, 2024 at 9:10 a.m. EST.

**Board members present:** Jin Y. Park, Thelathia Nikki Young, Laurel Schneider, Dena Pence, Darla Schumm; Ann Gleig; Ristina Gooden; Claudia Schippert; Kathleen Sands.

- I. **Greetings and call to order** (President Park)
- II. **Bylaw Review.** As of 1/12/2024, the following bylaw changes were found to be necessary and will be brought to the business meeting in November for approval.

### **Article VII. Committees of the Board and Working Groups**

#### **Part I. Committees of the Board**

##### **Section 2. Finance and Audit Committee.**

The Finance and Audit Committee shall oversee the financial aspects of the AAR including the annual budget, investments, and fiscal planning and shall review the annual audit **and tax filings**, recommending, as appropriate, its acceptance by the Board. Membership shall include **the President-Elect**, one At-Large Director and three Members who are not on the Board of Directors, **one of whom could be a non-AAR member, with experience in business management, financial and/or investment oversight.** ~~and the AAR Executive Director~~. The Chief Finance Officer/Chief Operating Officer shall staff the Committee. The Finance and Audit Committee is chaired by the Treasurer.

- III. **Taskforce on Valuing and Evaluating Public Scholarship.** This Task Force will effectuate some recommendations of the Presidential Futures Task Force.
  - a. **Composition.** Three members are chairs of relevant committees: Rachel Mikva (Public Understanding of Religion), Russell McCutcheon (Academic Relations Committee), and Brent Plate (Publications committee). Other members: Maria Carrion (Emory and Academic Relations committee), Victoria Machado, and Jeremy Sorgen.

**Motion IV** – to approve a Taskforce on Valuing and Evaluating Public Scholarship, charged to create “Guidelines for Valuing and Evaluating Public Scholarship in Religion” that reflect and encourage best practices among institutions of higher education and in the guild itself. Such a document will provide support for colleagues seeking to “count” their public scholarship in

placement, promotion, and tenure. It should also guide the activities of AAR to ensure adequate visibility and status for colleagues engaged in this work. The task force will draw on its members' expertise, best practices established by institutions on the leading edge of this change, existing guidelines in related guilds, public expressions of scholarship from diverse communities and religious traditions, and additional research as necessary in order to produce a draft of the above named "Guidelines..." by January, 2025, i.e. in time for the full Board of Directors Meeting.

**Motion approved unanimously.**

- IV. Report from E.D. Claudia Schippert on **initiatives and opportunities** that emerged from staff retreat.
- a. **Fundraising.** In connection with the Plaskow induction, we have created a named travel grant. We also have three named excellence awards that are as yet unfunded.
  - b. **Sponsorship opportunities** and collaborations include receptions and booths at the Annual Meeting, YRP, and fellowships.
  - c. **Policy on contributions.** The AAR now has a more extensive policy on gifts, donations, and scholarships.
  - d. **Committee on Awards Book.** A subcommittee was formed in January 2023 to review existing award programs. Committee consisted of President-elect Leela Prasad, Treasurer Dean Pence, Former President Amir Hussein, and AAR CFO/COO Nichol  Franklin. The work of this committee has been suspended pending the outcome of our Task Forces on Strategic Planning and Valuing/Evaluating Public Scholarship.
  - e. **AAR governance webinar.** Might be offered at the June online meeting, to better cultivate leadership among members. BoD members may be called upon to participate.

Adjourned at 11:30 a.m. EST

Respectfully submitted,

Kathleen Sands  
Secretary to the the Board