

American Academy of Religion
AAR Board of Directors Meeting
Fall Meeting September 2021

Asynchronous Portion of the Meeting
August 25-September 11, 2021

In advance of the virtual meeting, the following materials were made available in Basecamp to board members:

- Board Meeting Agenda for Virtual Meeting September 11, 2021
- AAR Graduate Student Ambassador Program Report
- Journalism Award Revision Recommendation
- Program Committee Nominations
- AAR Standing Committee Annual Reports
 - Vice President Summary and Observations
 - Executive Director Observations
- Committee Work Changes Proposal
- 2022 Proposed Budget

Board members were invited to a virtual conversation time on Thursday, September 9, to discuss any questions / concerns arising from the asynchronous portion of the board meeting.

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Virtual Meeting September 11, 2021

MINUTES

Present: Marla Frederick, Mayra Rivera, Amir Hussein, Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Whitney Bauman, Brian Pennington, Nicole Kirk, Zayn Kassam, Aarti Patel, Randall Styers, Laurel Schneider

Staff and Guests Present: Kathryn McClymond, Alice Hunt, Nichol  Jefferson, Robert Puckett, Dorrie Toney, Elizabeth Hardcastle

I. Call to Order (12 p.m. EDT, Saturday, September 11, 2021)

II. Approval of Agenda

Motion 1: To approve the agenda

Motion seconded and approved

III. President's Report (Marla Frederick)

President Marla Frederick opened the September 2021 Meeting of the AAR Board of Directors by reflecting on the significance of the events of September 11, 2001, exactly 20 years to the day before the meeting. She focused on the impact the aftermath of those attacks had worldwide, as well as the many ways that global politics, discussions of religion, and scholarship have been shaped in response and reaction to those events. Her remarks included the following:

“September 11th was a wake-up call for many universities, a reminder that Religion Matters and the best way to make us global citizens is to help the world understand and appreciate religious differences, to appreciate the ways in which religion wields power in the world, to understand that religion of every stripe, including fundamentalist Christian and fundamentalist Islam can wreak havoc in our world. And, at the same time, religion can help people form community and live out lives of purpose, perseverance and altruism. So our work is to help our students and the broader public understand the histories, the traditions, the texts, the rituals that shape people and thus our communities and our world. And, so with that I want to thank you for the great work that you do every day, not only on the board, but also in your classrooms and in your broader spheres of influence.”

President Frederick thanked Alice Hunt and the staff of the AAR for their hard work during a very trying year for the country and our organization. The pandemic continues to challenge us, membership has declined as university budgets become more constrained and the number of contingent faculty without research or travel resources grows.

- The Executive Committee. The EC as well as other AAR committees have continued to meet at a regular pace via zoom. The EC drafted a number of statements in 2021, including one in response to the January 6 insurrection at the US Capitol and one addressing anti-Asian American hate. In addition, the EC signed on to several statements issued by sister organizations addressing issues of academic freedom and tenure protection. The increasing number and range of requests for statements by the Board of Directors inspired lengthy discussion of the role of the Board, especially given its mandate to represent the full range of membership and commitment to democratic processes and member involvement at the annual Business Meeting. After comparison of policies by sister organizations, the EC wrote and approved an initial policy draft which was submitted to the full Board for discussion and approval. The Board approved a new policy, which is now posted on the AAR website. President Frederick noted that the new policy will encourage clarity and greater circumspection in requests for statements and will increase involvement by concerned parties in drafting them.

- The Graduate Student Working Group. This group, led by the Graduate Student Representative to the Board Aarti Patel, was formed to explore ways to increase graduate student involvement in the AAR. The GSWG's report on findings and recommendations thus far is posted in the asynchronous materials for the Board.
- The Futures Task Force. This task force, headed by Kathryn McClymond, is continuing to work on the big questions of AAR planning, structure, and purposes moving forward, especially the question "if we re-imagined the AAR from the ground up, what would it look like for today's scholars?" The Board will hear from this Task Force in today's discussion.
- Finances. The financial structure of the AAR continues to be strained by decreased revenues from memberships as well as annual meeting registration drops during the pandemic. Because this does not appear to be changing soon, budgeting and fundraising are increasing in importance for us.
- Contingent Faculty. This is one of our three priorities at present, in addition to fundraising and the Futures Task Force. The Academic Labor and Contingent Faculty Committee co-chairs have indicated a need for tenured faculty presence on the committee (with one as co-chair), to assist in bringing the needs of contingent faculty to tenured members.
- Investment. In consultation with the Finance Committee and staff, President Frederick hopes the Investment Committee will bring a motion forward, to be voted on at the November meeting, that the AAR commit to investing at least half of our investment funds with minority-owned firms that have excellent returns and meet our other investment policies.
- Annual Meeting, San Antonio. In response to various communications from members requesting that the in-person meeting be canceled, President Frederick reiterated that in-person participation is not required as the staff have been working hard to expand options for remote involvement, although the costs of full hybridity are impossible to meet. This will be a discussion item in the full Board meeting.

IV. Executive Director's Report (Alice Hunt)

In Memoriam

As is our custom at this meeting, we note the following AAR members who passed away this year:

Gary D. Bouma
David W. Cain
Carol P. Christ
Elizabeth Clark

Tom F. Driver
Robert Goldenberg
Wendy Griffin
Van A. Harvey
Hans J. Hillerbrand
Rodney J. Hunter
Michael Jerryson
Donald Musser
Micheline Pesantubbee
Leonard Norman Primiano
Donald W. Shriver

Professional Conduct Review: Alice Hunt reminded the Board that comments are being solicited from the membership for the Professional Conduct review process. The committee assigned with that task needs to receive input about issues that should be addressed in the review by the end of October.

Program Committee nominations are due. Please submit nominations to President Frederick. Candidates must have extensive prior program unit experience, those with experience as chairs of program units are especially important for this committee.

Goals for the Executive Director and Staff. Alice Hunt reported on goals as collectively determined for 2021 from last year

1. Continue addressing pandemic-related issues. Needless to say, this has taken the majority of energy and time.
2. Work on Standard Operating Procedures. We have made progress, and this work continues.
3. Public Engagement Plan. This work has been slowed by pandemic-related issues, but the delays may be helpful as questions grow regarding what can and should we, as a guild, be doing about publics understandings of religions.
4. Year-round programming. This continues to grow in importance as the pandemic changes the nature of guild participation locally and nationally.
5. Assist the Executive Committee in implementing a committee evaluation process.
6. Serve as PI for Luce grant to build a more vibrant Reading Religion website, which we hope to launch soon, in addition to the Advancing Public Scholarship mini-grants funded by this grant.
7. AAR/SBL Joint Regions Task Force. This work has not moved forward yet, but will do so as part of the Futures Task Force planning.
8. Balancing the budget in years ahead. This remains a priority, though the finances are difficult to predict in the continuing pandemic.
9. Help the Board assess early and often the possibility and prospects for the Annual Meeting this year and in the future. The financial implications of canceling the in-person meeting are great, as are the medical, social, and political issues on every side of the matter.

10. Continue to offer robust support to the committees. The Executive Committee and staff have put in a great deal of time on issues related to supporting the committees and have a recommendation to make to the Board.

The issues that are pressing, looking forward, include:

- Attending to the most vulnerable AAR membership
- Environmental issues and responsibilities
- The use and misuse of religion in public
- Distressed departments and institutions
- Helping to clarify member expectations of the role/s of the AAR as a diverse member-driven body

V. Core Functions and Responsibilities Discussion (Mayra Rivera)

Vice President Rivera led a lengthy discussion on the work of the Futures Task Force thus far. She noted that the Task Force needs assistance from the Board of Directors in establishing clear expectations for its work so that there are parameters for its decision-making. The FTF is looking at how to foster more realistic expectations about what the board and AAR can do in light of limited resources. Clarifying these goals can help to better allocate resources toward meeting the larger purposes of the organization. What, for example, are the things that only the AAR can do? The practical application of the AAR mission, to “foster excellence and enhance public understanding of religion” requires this clarification because the organization, a member-led group, cannot do it all, or be everything for everyone, especially with limited fiscal resources.

After lengthy discussion, the Board members specified several key organizing principles that should govern future planning:

1. Although it is an organization of scholars, the AAR is *not* itself a producer of scholarship on religion.
2. The AAR is best suited to provide spaces of interaction among those who produce scholarship on religion. It is best suited to the encouragement of scholarly engagement and networking.
3. In facilitating such spaces of engagement and interaction, the AAR can be a site of translation, wherein members extend out of silos of research into other disciplines and the public.
4. By recognizing the vulnerability of historically marginalized groups and the growth of contingent labor practices, the AAR can facilitate and provide spaces for these groups to share resources among themselves, organize as needed, and shed light on issues.
5. The annual meeting is central to these goals, as are the regional meetings.
6. Clear communication about the capacities and limitations of the organization is critical to the success of its mission. The volunteer Board of Directors, the staff, the volunteer committees, and so forth, can better discern the parameters and goals of the work and thereby strengthen its effectiveness.

VI. Executive Committee Report

The Executive Committee brought three proposals to the full Board of Directors for a vote:

1. Committees of the Board appointments
 - a. Angela Sims to Finance Committee
 - b. Josef Sorett to Governance Committee

MOTION 2: Approve committee appointments

Motion approved.

2. Establishment of a Status Committee Caucus
 - a. This caucus will bring together the chairs of the status committees for mutual discussion and exchange of shared and intersectional concerns.
 - b. Charge: The AAR Status Committee Caucus fosters collaboration for intersectional work among the status committees and advises the board on best practices and policies to achieve this goal.

MOTION 3: That an AAR Status Committee Caucus is created and charged with fostering collaboration for intersectional work among the status committees and advising the board on best practices and policies to achieve this goal.

Motion approved.

3. Revision of the Journalism Award

The current journalism award focuses strictly on written reporting. Because of changes in media and news reporting, the recommendation is that the AAR award for journalism be divided into two categories, with the award money divided equally between them:

 1. *Journalism Award for Best In-Depth Newswriting* – This award recognizes outstanding reporting on religion presented in written news articles, columns, editorials, and other reporting in any published medium of any audience/market size. Up to three submissions are acceptable per entry to be saved as a single PDF or DOC file. 1st place \$500; 2nd place \$150; 3rd place; \$100.
 2. *Journalism Award for Best In-Depth Multimedia Journalism* – This award recognizes outstanding reporting on religion that utilizes broadcast, radio, podcast, interactives, or other multimedia new media, distributed for any audience or market size. Eligible submissions include religion reporting utilizing audio, visual, or other digital technologies to tell stories about religion. News commentary or opinion are not eligible. Submissions should be submitted as stable URLs. If any URL points behind a paywall or file protection, please be sure to provide password and login information. Up to three submission packages are accepted per entry, each defined as a single act of reporting inclusive of print and media files. The three packages are not to exceed 60 minutes in total. 1st place \$500; 2nd place \$150; 3rd place \$100.

MOTION 4: To adopt the journalism award as recommended.

Motion approved

VII. Futures Task Force Report

Kathryn McClymond, chair of the Futures Task Force, joined the Board for further discussion of the FTF and its work to date.

The first year of the two-year charge of the FTF has involved the collection of data about the membership and its various (and sometimes divergent) needs. Several points are important to remember.

- The committee does not find useful the older Center-Margin model of thinking about constituencies.
- The metaphor of facets in a gem has been helpful.
- The committee has been attempting think about scholarship in religion beyond the academy, and if that is a growing area of venues for scholarship, how does that constituency map onto the areas of focus (and resources allocation) of the AAR
- The FTF is not charged with providing detailed recommendations, but to give broad-brush recommendations based on its work.
- It is difficult not to slip into the temptation of listing everything the AAR should do, rather than *who* is/are the AAR, and where are the points of pain.

VIII. Annual Meeting

As the Executive Director noted, the Program Committee has been working to establish procedures for reviewing program units. Because of the pandemic, the committee used the past year of deferred reviews to work on policies.

Board members were reminded to submit nominations for the Program Committee.

The 2021 Annual Meeting is still scheduled for in-person in San Antonio Texas.

TOTAL REGISTRANTS as of 9/10/21

4867 In Person (81%)
1134 Virtual (19%)
6001 Total

AAR Sessions
370 In Person (66%)
193 Virtual (34%)
563 Total

Other Events
127 In Person (84%)
24 Virtual (16%)

As of 9/11/2021, numbers are shifting toward virtual in sessions, but also registrations are shifting from in-person to virtual.

Health & Safety precautions and policies for the San Antonio meeting:

- Epistemics is a company helping with protocols, a report will arrive from them within the week.
- The meeting will have a vaccine and/or testing mandate. Verification may be available through a “share my health” app which uses a HPPA compliant data base.
- Masking mandate of all attendees except when presenting or actively eating and drinking. The AAR facilities and convention center all mandate mask use, and hotels will have mask mandates for employees. Hand sanitation and foggers will sanitize facilities overnight. HVAC systems have been upgraded
- All contractors will have to wear masks
- Rooms will be reduced capacity. People must sit in available seats, no standing room.
- Different presentation options. Presenters are allowed to send a video recording of the presentation with “simulive” to pre-record presentation, which can be uploaded in the app, to be shown in real time in the in-person session, and then becomes available to everyone who is present virtually.
- October 21 change fees exempted
- Virtual presenters can do so at the virtual rate even if session is in person.
- People are encouraged to get travel insurance and reservations that are flexible.

For the meeting to break even, financially, 4,500-5,000 in person registrants in hotel accommodations will be needed.

IX. Finance Report and FY22 Budget

Randall Styers, Treasurer of the Board, and Nichole Franklin, Chief Finance and Administration Offices of the AAR, provided the finance report and FY22 Budget.

- The Annual Meeting. The AM is a large area of uncertainty, as the pandemic continues to challenge expectations. Current projections have the infection numbers going down to the levels of June 2021 by the start of the AM, but nothing is certain about what will happen with registration and attendance. We expect to see shifts in the number of people attending in person vs. virtual. If exhibitors change or cancel that will affect revenue picture for the year. Also, membership rates are historically driven by what happens at the annual meeting – membership renewal goes hand in hand with attendance at the meeting, so if attendance drops, we are expecting drop in membership renewals. All of this affects the financial picture.

- Luce Center. The staff have moved to a remote-first working environment. No decisions have been made about office space in order to see what this arrangement looks like over time. The AAR occupies about one third of the Luce building. This change in occupancy could that mean an opportunity to rent out some of the space. Because of joint tenancy agreement with the SBL, we want to be careful with agreements with Emory and with both organizations. Depending on that, there may be some revenue stream possibility for some of the office space.

MOTION 3: to approve the FY22 Budget.
Motion seconded and approved.

X. Awards

President Frederick presented three AAR award proposals. All three have presented naming opportunities for fundraising. The goal is to raise \$120,000 for each award. Because each award is named for a major, influential figure in religious scholarship, we anticipate strong response to the campaigns.

The three award recommendations are:

1. Change the name of the AAR Excellence in Teaching Award to the **AAR Katie Geneva Cannon Excellence in Teaching Award**.
2. Establish the **AAR Lawrence H. Mamiya Excellence in Public Service Award** and begin giving the award once the endowment is established.
3. Establish the **AAR James H. Cone Excellence in Mentoring Award** and begin giving the award once the endowment is established.

MOTION 4: To accept all three recommendations
Motion seconded and approved.

XI. Additional Business and Wrap-Up

The Board discussed a letter signed by 38 program unit chairs requesting cancellation of the in-person Annual Meeting in San Antonio. There are over 150 committees of the AAR, but the issues raised by the signatories are important, and the members of the Board wished to recognize and discuss the issue. In general, the fears represented by members who name the pandemic, the accessibility difficulties of contingent and other resource-limited members, and the radical political conservatism of the state of Texas are all viable reasons for members to decide not to attend. The Board discussion centered on the financial implications of cancellation, which could go over \$1M in damages to the AAR, as well as the loss of employment to vulnerable facility and venue staff in San Antonio. The AAR staff has pivoted multiple times to expand remote participation options. Some members who plan to attend have also named the importance of AAR presence in the face of problematic recent political moves in the state.

The Board members appreciated the concerns and contributions of the letter signatories, and recognize the merits of the positions of those who choose to (or must) participate remotely.

XII. Adjournment

The Board adjourned at 5:02 pm, EDT.

Respectfully Submitted
Laurel C. Schneider, Vanderbilt University
Secretary