

American Academy of Religion
Board of Directors Meeting
January 25-26, 2025
Atlanta, Georgia

Present: Leela Prasad (President); Laura Schneider (President-Elect); Angela D. Sims (Vice President); Kathleen Sands (Secretary); Ann Gleig (Program Unit Director); Ristina Gooden (Student Director); Patrick Reyes (Contingent Faculty Director); Nikia Robert (Treasurer); Darla Schumm (At-Large Director); Matthew Vaughan (Regions Director); Heather White (Status Committees Director).
Absent: Keri Day (At-Large Director).

Staff present: Nicholé Franklin (CFO/COO); Claudia Schippert (Executive Director).

Please note that all Board discussions are confidential.

All committee reports and related documents are available in Basecamp
The meeting was called to order at 9 a.m.

I Welcome - President Leela Prasad.

II Agenda - approved by acclamation.

III Minutes of Board meeting in San Diego (November 2024) – approved by acclamation.

IV President's Report - Leela Prasad.

- a. Goals. Over the past year, Leela attended standing committee meetings and reflected on the needs/priorities of the AAR. We must become a more hospitable place, materially and ideologically. To make our actions congruent with our values, we must identify inequities, hear calls for change, and take steps in response. At the same time, we must find paths toward regaining financial strength.
- b. The state of the Humanities. Closures of programs and colleges are ongoing. We anticipate continued pushback and the need to bolster coalitional work.
- c. Contingent faculty. A goal of Leela's presidential year is to foster practices that better respect the dignity of contingent faculty.
- d. Freedom, the presidential theme for 2025. In June, we will have a plenary session about rescued elephants. In November meeting, one plenary will be a performance put together by Joshua Campbell and Roopa Mahadevan; the second will discuss freedom in the academy.

V. Executive Director's report - Claudia Schippert

- a. Emory and Luce Center. We are creating a formal affiliation, having discovered that none exists. We are looking for more Luce Center rentals to increase revenue.
- b. New website. Color scheme will be unchanged, but information streamlined. There are new sections for Religious Studies Matters, advocacy (including RS toolbox), affiliated organizations, teaching (with links to award winners), public engagement, careers, and community. The community section will have regional microsites. (Please send photos of interesting activity if you have them). The website will be better integrated with Religious Studies News and Reading Religion.

c. Launch of new systems. In early March, the Content Management System (CMS) will launch, then be connected with the Association Management System (AMS). These systems were costly, but we anticipate a long-term partnership with them. Also, the increased automation will save staff time. PAPERS will continue to be a self-contained system. See ED's written report for other improvements within the new AMS.

d. Webinars. We made a good start in 2024. A number of groups have approached AAR staff asking to do them. They will be set up by Jacob Robinson (AAR staff). While live webinars are currently accessible to the public, the recordings are typically limited to member access. In 2025, we expect to offer several webinars per month, including interactive and experimental ones. In addition, several new programs are starting: an accountability writing group (2 hours twice a week) and mentoring initiatives in publishing (generally), writing book reviews, and applied religious studies. We also will be launching a monthly check-in for new members.

On June 23 (the day before the June online meeting starts) we hope to offer a free online workshop that will be open to the public.

- e. Meeting with representatives of petitioners for cancellation of San Antonio 2029. Claudia, Steed Davidson (SBL's ED), Nikki Young and Tammi Schneider (SBL council). Petitioners are concerned that attendees who are or might be pregnant could be endangered by Texas anti-abortion laws. Claudia's group shares this concern but said it would be more productive to do community outreach in these sites.

The representatives of the petitioners appear to maintain their call for a boycott. Claudia notes that even if some members boycott San Antonio in 2029, the economic losses would be less than what we'd incur by backing out of the site.

- f. Future Annual Meetings. Sites must be able to handle up to 8000 people. Contracts are made in conjunction with the SBL, with the help of a consultancy firm. Contracts are in place through 2031; after that we will avoid Texas and Florida.

A company called Social Offset combines event planning and social activism. They help organization to offset harms in the cities they visit by contributing to appropriate not-for-profits that work for marginalized groups. Perhaps social offsets could be built into future contracts.

- g. Annual business meeting. Historically, we have scheduled this for 7:30 a.m. on Sunday mornings during the November meeting. However, it is hard to get a quorum. Few members participate, so the meeting is not a good avenue for their input.

Let's consider re-positing that meeting to the June online meeting. This would require adjusting the bylaws, re-scheduling the passing of the presidential gavel, and finding a different way to memorialize recently deceased members. But June is a better time for review of the budget and will get better attendance.

We request the AAR staff to pursue a schedule change in the ABM to June, in connection with the annual online meeting. We also request that program units hold their business meetings in June.

VI Treasurer report - Nikia Robert

- a. Timing of this report. Actuals are not known until late February or early March. Variances should be understood in this light.
- b. Value of assets. Since June 2023, our assets have lost about \$522K in value. Some of this is due to market fluctuations; some is due to funding our new systems through our Equity investments. (We drew down more than the 5% prescribed by AAR policy.) The balance of our endowment is equal to only 2.5 years of organizational operation.
- c. Budgeting. Our goal is to return to 80 or 85% of pre-pandemic revenues and expenses. (Comparisons are tagged to meeting site). Attendance in 2024 rose above the 85% target.

Membership revenue is down in today's report, but this will likely even out when we finalize the numbers.

- d. Increasing membership. Strategies include increasing the value of membership (e.g., by year-round-programming) and kinds of membership (e.g., institutional memberships). We might consider linking membership benchmarks to other field indicators (e.g., numbers of majors, jobs). Claudia notes that we are now accounting more accurately for membership numbers and communicating better with members about expirations and renewals.
- e. Responsible investment. The AAR has a responsible investment policy (available on our website).

VII. Regions Report – Regions Director Matthew Vaughan.

- a. Regional activities: All have meetings scheduled for 2025, some over more than one day, many at universities. All have signed on to the new operating agreement, set up the new elections process, and transferred their accounts to Truist. All but one (Western) showed up at the Regional Council Meeting in San Diego, California.
- b. Relationship with AAR staff and BoD. At Regional Council Meeting, some objected to perceived "top down" standards and procedures or felt "dismissed."
- c. Needs of Chief Regional Officers (CROs). Help with technology; help getting volunteers do the regional work. The Northeast region held a public information session, which generated a number of volunteers. Some regional leaders also want new networks of scholars (Matthew notes that it would be more efficient to use existing structures and, if necessary, add new sections).
- d. What we can do. Attend regional meetings and encourage our students to do the same. Recognize and appreciate regional efforts. Communicate more often and more individually. Consider adjusting timeline for regional reports (which are often late). Include regions in our strategic planning. Solicit questions from the CRO's prior to visit from the presidential line.
- e. Regional grants. These are being paused for a year, along with most other grants and awards. There were four proposals this year, each with problems. Matthew suggests a process for mentoring people through the regional grant application process.

VIII. Program Committee Report – Program Committee Director Ann Gleig

- a. Program Unit mission and work. All 160 units have updated their guidelines.
- b. San Diego meeting. Attendee numbers were the highest of recent years; people liked meeting in person. Post annual meeting survey results: low response rate (17%); more call themselves independent scholars than in the past. Nearly 60% of respondents were participants (more details are in the written report). An oddity is that while 91% did not use our professional development sessions, many also asked for more such sessions. Ann encourages units to think more holistically about integrating professional development – e.g., using a session for this purpose.
- c. The proliferation problem. We continue to hear complaints about program overlaps and low attendance, yet units are unwilling to give up what they have. As a first step, the Program Committee eliminated 20 sessions by reducing Tiers 4 and 5 by one 90-minute face-to-face session. (They can get the session back in the online meeting if they want). Only one significant complaint was received about this change.
- d. Microphones. Whether online or in person, units should be sure to use microphones; this is an accessibility issue.

- e. Online meeting. Only 12% of survey respondents said they plan to attend the June meeting, underling the need for promotion efforts. 60 program units are now signed up for June (up from 50 in June 2024).
- f. Diversifying program offerings. Program committee will solicit pre-conference workshops and continues to encourage innovative sessions.
- g. Decisions about units. Two were sunsetting, two were approved. Despite the proliferation problem, we must foster new and innovative scholarship. New ones will only get one 90-minute session.
- h. Motions concerning renewal and non-renewal of Related Scholarly Organizations (RSOs). RSO's that are not renewed this year may re-apply next year.

Motion 1: The Program Committee moves that the Board approve renewal for these six RSOs: African Association for the Study of Religion; International Association for the Cognitive and Evolutionary Sciences of Religion; Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies; Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion; Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy; Theta Alpha Kappa.

Seconded and unanimously approved

Motion 2: The Program Committee moves that the Board not renew RSO status for these two RSOs: The Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Monotheistic Religions, and The European Organization for the Study of Esotericism.

Seconded and unanimously approved.

Motion 3: The Program Committee moves that the Board not approve RSO status for the Institute for Mennonite Studies.

Seconded and unanimously approved.

- IX. Year-long pause in awards and grants – ED Claudia Schippert.
 - a. The Board decided to implement this at our November 2024 meeting. It does not apply to book and travel awards (although book awards may be reviewed at a later time). We have received pushback from a few members. The process: create a small committee which will provide recommendations to the board in June; goal is not so much to save money as to create coherence and compatibility with the new systems. We also have to address the problem of unfunded awards.
 - b. Discussion: Leela notes that the AAR has changed since some of these awards were created – for example, we now place more emphasis on public scholarship. At the same time, we should continue supporting deep scholarship in the Humanities, because we are one of the few places where that happens.
 - c. Getting started. Elizabeth Hardcastle (AAR's Governance Specialist) has gathered information on grants since 2018– who gets them, for what purpose, etc.

- IX. Draft guidelines for Valuing and Evaluating Public Scholarship – ED Claudia Schippert (based on report by chair Rachel Mikva, documents 9a and 9b in Basecamp).
 - a. Implementation of the seven recommendations. The first three recommendations concern the recognition and evaluation of public scholarship and its dissemination to scholars and institutions. Claudia notes that we have a webinar planned on these issues, as a continuing education/professional development initiative. It is important to get high-level administrators to attend. Perhaps we can invite leaders from ATS and similar orgs.

- We should make use of our Committee on the Public Understanding of Religion (CPUR) (which is working on a certificate program) and the Wabash Center.
- b. Discussion of recommendation #7. “Let scholars know that the institution/administration will stand by them if their responsible, public-facing work generates public controversy, and follow through.” There was much discussion of how this aspiration should be framed, given the exigencies of institutions. We discussed alternative phrasings such as “encourage institutional transparency about the risks of public scholarship and the support the institution will give;” or “develop pro-active institutional strategies for supporting responsible public-facing work when and if that work generates controversy.” We might also publicize programs/institutions that adopt a supportive stance for public scholarship.
 - c. Moving forward. Task Force members have agreed to keep working until May 2025 on the rollout of these recommendations. If they are happy with the directions we suggest, they could continue to refine and implement the recommendations.
- XI. Graduate Student Report – Graduate Student Director Ristina Gooden
- a. Survey result. A survey sent to 2000 graduate students yielded 157 responses, among which were reports of debt, hunger, and homelessness. By admitting graduate students that they cannot adequately fund, programs are committing “academic malpractice.”
 - b. Needs of graduate students include preparation for teaching, readiness for non-academic careers, and mentoring (including peer-mentoring). Ristina suggested a Task Force on graduate students, with a report to be published on our website.
 - c. Discussion: we should expand mentoring well beyond the “cup of coffee.” We could match up grad students seeking mentors with people willing to mentor (e.g., for a year). We can provide information on how numbers of grad students compare to available jobs (using a report soon to be released by the ACLS), so that grad programs make realistic decisions about how many students to admit. We can offer webinars on jobs outside the academy and generally offer more validation and encouragement to graduate students on non-academic career paths. We might use institutional memberships to incentivize good practices regarding grad students and programs.
- XII. Status Committee Director Report - Status Committee Director Heather White
- Following up on two suggestions from the 2024 Summit.
- a. Great Expectations. The AAR website already provides best practices for employees who post jobs with us, to which employers must assent. However, the proposal was aimed at creating more accountability and equity throughout the search process.
 - b. Legacies task force. The proposal is that, alongside our recent report on Futures, we create a task force to address exclusionary practices of our profession in the past.
 - c. Discussion: As an organization with 6000 members, we do have influence. We can refuse an ad for any reason. Our responses should be generative, rather than reactive, and within the capacity of our staff. Members seem to want more information about jobs. Oregon State has a [Search Advocate](#) program with good resources.

The Meeting was suspended at 4:30 pm.

The Meeting resumed Sunday January 26, 2025

Present: Leela Prasad; Laurel Schneider; Angela Sims; Nikia Robert; Ann Gleig; Ristina Gooden; Patrick Reyes; Darla Schumm; Matthew Vaughn; Heather White; Kathleen Sands; Claudia Schippert.

Absent: Keri Day.

The meeting was called to order at 9 a.m.

Announcements – President Leela Prasad

- Board members please fill out the yearly conflict of interest forms, sign electronically, and send them to Claudia.
 - The Committee on Grants and Awards has been formed. Vice President Angela Sims will chair, joined by Contingent Faculty Director Patrick Reyes and Secretary Kath Sands, and AAR staff Claudia Schippert, Elizabeth Hardcastle, and Marchell Jackson. They are charged to re-evaluate current grants and awards in light of our values, budget, and staff capabilities. They will also consult current juries for their input.
 - Please use the reimbursement form for relevant expenses, such as a meal following this meeting.
- I. Interim report on Strategic Planning Task Force – President-Elect Laurel Schneider
- a. The Task Force aims to implement the recommendations of the Futures Task Force. Recognizing that potentially difficult changes are facing our guild, the Strategic Planning Task Force aims to authorize and support those who will implement? such changes – e.g., AAR staff, Program Committee, etc. Six strategic priorities are under discussion: increasing effectiveness/efficiency; improving equity of access; providing career support in changing circumstances; advocating for RS in higher education; (re)aligning AAR governance structure; budget/development.
 - b. Discussion – in general, the task forces recognizes that big changes are on the way for our field. We need to think beyond traditional forms of membership, programming, career and professional development, and forms of academic presentation. We also need to align our various strategic priorities so that they work as a whole. In particular, we notice the connections between protecting RS in higher education and promoting the public understanding of religion.
 - c. The Strategic Planning Task Force will complete its work next year.
- II. Academic Labor and Contingent Faculty Committee Report – Contingent Faculty Director Patrick Reyes
- a. Four new people have joined this committee, and it needs some direction from the BoD. Panels at the Annual Meeting do not make much difference. Two-thirds of people getting PhDs in the field do not get academic jobs. There is a lot of grief about this and a need to be better seen. For example, maybe the website could sometimes spotlight individual contingent faculty.
 - b. Discussion: Patrick has helped us understand the needs of this large and important constituency. We need a cultural change, and maybe a change in our brand, to recognize that the critical study of religion is done in many places and in many ways. The problems of contingent faculty are linked with the public understanding of religion. The website Beyond the Professoriate, to which we subscribe, helps people identify skills and

competencies for jobs outside the academy. A website called [ImaginePhD](#) that may also offer helpful resources.

III. AAR Policies - ED Claudia Schippert

- a. ED Schippert has asked Status Committee Director Heather White and At-Large Director Darla Schumm to review our existing policies. Some may need revision.
- b. Policy for resolutions and statements, passed by AAR Board on July 19, 2021. In view of the increasing number of requests for AAR statements, the BoD members should be familiar with these policies. Resolutions are of/by the membership and must be submitted to the full membership for approval. Statements are of/by the BoD, and are in response to issues of academic freedom, program closures, government funding for the humanities, and the working conditions of RS scholars. The burden of explaining why the AAR should make a statement is on the proposer.

IV. Review of this meeting – President Leela Prasad

A call for clarity on our processes and communications – e.g., with regional leadership.

The need to stand by our constituencies – e.g., people doing public scholarship, graduate student, contingent faculty. Task forces?

Could/should the AAR create an IRB?

Holistic mentoring of graduate students.

Online June meeting – how much staff energy to devote.

Webinars and YRP – important for sustaining and increasing our membership

Public understanding of religion – seems ever more important as we reorient the AAR.

“The A’s” - appreciation (for volunteer labor, contingent faculty, regional leadership); accountability, assurance, alignment, and aspiration.

New/ongoing business – ED Claudia Schippert

1. AAR is part of a larger grant for mapping religious studies (AAR, ACLS and NHC). Purpose is to document public-facing work so that people are less isolated and don't reinvent the wheel.
2. America at 250 years. We are co-sponsoring a project on the significance of religion at the founding of the US. Led by the National Museum of American Religion, this will be a collaboration of scholarly guilds, museums, and scholars. If you are interested in this group, go to the museum's website and get on their mailing list.
3. Legacies – re proposal from Status Committee Summit. President Leela Prasad suggests that we keep this conversation going. There is a lot of scholarship on the exclusionary practices in the field, and some schools have legacy task forces. Might our program units take some of this on? Could our website include material about the institutional history of the field? Might our Strategic Plan take note of the reparative aspects of the work we do?

Respectfully submitted

Kathleen Sands

Secretary to the Board of Directors