



American Academy of Religion  
Board of Directors Online Meeting  
Saturday, June 14+15, 2025

***Saturday June 14, 2025***

Present: Leela Prasad (President); Laurel Schneider (President Elect), Angela Sims (Vice President); Nikia Robert (Treasurer), Kathleen Sands (Secretary), Keri Day (At Large Director), Darla Schumm (At Large Director), Ristina Gooden (Student Director), Patrick Reyes (Contingent Faculty Director), Matthew Vaughn (Regions Director), Heather White (Status Committee Director).

Ex Officio: Claudia Schippert (Executive Director)  
Staff Members: Nichol  Franklin (CFO/COO)

Absent: Ann Gleig (Program Unit Director)

The meeting was called to order at noon Eastern Time.

**I. Welcome (Prasad)**

Agenda: Motion to approve made, approved by acclamation  
Minutes of Board of Directors meeting, January 2025: motion to approve made, approved by acclamation

**II. President's Report (Prasad)**

The guiding concerns of this presidential year include restoring AAR's financial strength, developing coalitional activities and best practices, addressing department and program closures, exploring new collaborations, recognizing diversity, and cultivating inclusivity in the work of Religious Studies.

Freedom is the theme of the presidential plenaries. The first, at the June meeting, is a taped conversation Kartik Satyanarayan and Geeta Seeshamani, co-founders of Wildlife SOS (Mathura, India) about their work with rescued elephants. The video will be followed by Q&A. There will be two presidential plenaries at our November meeting in Boston: a performance/community experience with Josha Campbell and Roopa Mahadevan, and a panel

called "The Sovereignty of Hope" (on freedom in the academy) with Laurie Patton, James Bowley, Larissa Carneiro, and Koritha Mitchell.

### **III. Budget** (Robert and Franklin). See materials in Basecamp.

- a. Goals. The Finance Committee met on May 5th and June 1st. Its goals are: 1) fiscal transparency; 2) sustainability; 3) revenue generation.
- b. Planning. As we learned from the \$500K drawdown in March (necessitated partly by the time lag between expenses and revenues), we need stronger fiscal planning - for example, putting reserves aside. Going forward we must correct the deficit, break even, and progress to increasing AAR revenues. Treasurer Robert suggests a feasibility study to see market trends and how other orgs are developing resources.
- c. Cost cutting proposals. The proposed budget includes scenarios that will increase revenue through membership fees and will lower costs of grant and award programs (Motions 1 and 2 below).
- d. Revenues. Although registration for the Boston meeting may be less than last year, annual meeting expenses and revenues are not expected to vary significantly. Projections for 2026 include depreciation/amortization factors and a possible decline in rentals of the Luce building. The June meeting did not negatively affect November registrations, and some people attended both. We also project more income from Employment Services, having raised the rate to get closer to industry standards. The proposed change in dues, should we accept it, will also add to revenues.
- e. Expenses. Projected expenses for 2026 are admirably lean. Consultancy fees for the CMS and AMS are finally behind us and the new systems will save money in other areas (e.g., subscription services). As of 2026, the January and June board meetings will be online only, with substantial savings. (The bi-annual summit of status committees will continue to be in person.) One staff position has been removed, so salary costs remain roughly level. Anticipated miscellaneous expenses are halved. Expenses related to grants and awards also will be cut roughly in half if we accept the proposal advanced by the Committee on Grants and Awards.
- f. Discussion:  
All Board of Directors members should contribute to the AAR.  
Suggestions for increasing transparency: providing a treasurer's report to members, informing various sub-groups about facts that bear on their missions (e.g., telling juries about lack of funds for certain awards); sharing budget info at the regional meetings; website infographics (e.g., where your contributions go); offering workshops on how to read a budget.  
Suggestions for raising revenues. There is an emerging consensus that we need more fundraising expertise on the Board of Directors. Other ideas include: a fundraising/long range planning committee (aka advancement); a development professional on the AAR staff (which would require coming up with \$130-150K plus benefits); a membership drive stressing what the AAR offers; a multi-year capital campaign, perhaps in connection with the issuance of the strategic plan; creating more programs for which we can charge.

2:45-3 p.m. BREAK

**IV. Executive Director's Report** (Schippert). See full report in Basecamp.

Executive Director Schippert shared a timely observation from a 1934 letter by painter Otto Dix: "When you work now, it's as if you work for a future century." Their written report lays out achievements and plans in governance, programming, membership, staff/operations, and fundraising/partnerships. Some highlights:

a. AMS and CMS. These new systems are now largely implemented. The CMS (website) is visible to members, but not the AMS (Association Management System). Nonetheless, the AMS is at work behind the website, creating new functionalities and saving money going forward.

b. Responding to the moment. The changing landscape of higher education has put added stress on our guild and has demanded a great deal of Executive Director Schippert's attention. We've stood firm by endorsing multi-org statements and by our own actions - e.g., against the Navy's book ban. At the same time, Schippert has tried to protect our programs - for example, by changing wording of a grant program to avoid keyword scans.

c. Programming. The Executive Director has overseen new Year Round Programming, the June online meeting, new mentoring groups, and necessary reductions in allotted program sessions. Our programming now uses diverse delivery methods that reach beyond traditional academic communities.

d. Membership. Numbers are now more accurate (total is about 5800). Numbers in various categories have not shifted much. Initiatives are underway to recruit new members. We now reach out to people whose memberships are ending and are placing all members on autorenewal.

e. Governance and funding. Schippert thanks the board for its ethical, strategic, and wise leadership. At the same time, they see a great need to gain board members who have expertise in strategic planning, fundraising and organizational change (even if they may not be scholars).

**V. Proposal to raise membership dues** (Schippert). See proposal in Basecamp.

a. Student rates would go up \$10 (from \$50 to \$60). Non-student memberships are based on income. Most members are in the under \$80K categories and therefore will not see a change in fee. For those above \$80K, dues will increase between \$25 and \$75. The steps are now more uniform and the fees comparable to other scholarly orgs. Members also can save by purchasing a 3-year membership.

b. Discussion: Dues raises were discussed.

**MOTION 3 - To accept changes in dues structure as proposed.**

Seconded and passed (6 in favor, 5 opposed).

**VI. Presentation of Slate for Board Elections** (Schippert). See document in Basecamp.

This is confidential information.

**VII. Policy Review** (Schippert) Report in Basecamp.

Schippert will formulate these findings as proposals for changes.

### **VIII. Report and Proposal from Awards and Grants Review Committee (Sims)**

See report and proposal in Basecamp.

- a. The proposal reduces costs roughly by half, particularly by conferring awards online rather than at the November Annual Meeting; this cuts the costs formerly incurred for awardees' travel and lodging. The proposal also includes a new grant program (up to \$5K) for public scholarship.
- b. Discussion: Some regions may object to reduction in amount available for regional grants. We note that all grants and awards, other than the few that are endowed, will be reduced in this proposal.

### **MOTION 4 - to accept the proposal from the Awards and Grants Review Committee to restructure AAR grants and awards and institute a grant for public scholarship.**

Second and passed (10 in favor, 1 abstention).

### **IX. Budget – second reading, further discussion and vote (Robert)**

### **MOTION 5: to approve the budget as proposed, including increases in membership dues and restructuring of grants and awards.**

Seconded and passed unanimously

5:00 pm Meeting suspended.

### ***Sunday, June 15***

The meeting resumed at noon Eastern Time.

Present: Leela Prasad; Laurel Schneider, Angela Sims, Kathleen Sands, Darla Schumm, Ristina Gooden, Patrick Reyes, Matthew Vaughn, Heather White.

Ex officio - Claudia Schippert;

Staff: Amy Defibaugh (Director of Programming and Publications).

Absent: Ann Gleig, Keri Day, Nikia Robert.

The meeting was recalled to order at noon Eastern Time.

### **I. Call to order and greetings (Prasad)**

### **II. Update from Strategic Planning Taskforce (Schneider)**

- a. Six strategic priorities: increasing effectiveness/efficiency; improving equity of access; providing career support; advocating for Religious Studies in higher education; realigning AAR governance structure; budget/development.

b. Moving toward recommendations concerning membership expansion, restructuring AAR governance (perhaps with help of a paid consultant); clarification of our advocacy role; expansion of career support; evaluation of committees to maximize staff efficiency; improving fundraising in alignment with our mission.

c. A root challenge is our governance structure, which must be adjusted to include more expertise in running non-profits.

d. Discussion: Again, the gravamen of the discussion was that the AAR's current governance structure is not adequately equipped to ensure its sustainability. The constitution of the board has focused on scholars and inclusive representation, with higher education as its primary container. While these remain important, the structure of the board needs change (some say "radical" change) to add expertise on non-profit development and management. In addition, maybe we need a committee on advancement.

Other questions - Given that AAR membership elects the board, how shall we go about changing governance? Should we recruit more people with non-profit experience as AAR members and then get some of them on the Board, or should we change board structure as such? What should be the respective roles of scholars and non-profit experts in our governance? Should both be on one board, or in parallel structures? If the latter, how do we create unity of purpose?

We note that other learned societies (including the SBL) are faced with similar governance challenges and that we are learning alongside them.

e. Next steps - These changes we are considering here are profound ("seismic"). They must be done in alignment with our mission and in view of the findings the Strategic Planning Task Force (also recalling as the report of the Futures Task Force). The Governance Committee will review the relevant bylaws and propose changes in a year.

**III. Program Committee Report** (Defibaugh, ex officio, in place of Gleig). See report in Basecamp.

a. April Meeting of the Program Committee. The Committee decided about special sessions, exploratory sessions, and pre-conference workshops. The Committee also gave positive feedback on the new website.

b. AI and Religion. A new unit, approved overwhelmingly by the Program Committee.

c. The proliferation problem. Reduction in the number of program units and sessions remains an important objective, given that we have more sessions but half the members than in the past. Also, it becomes impossible to avoid scheduling conflicts. A small reduction of sessions (19) has been accomplished for the November Annual Meeting by decreasing the allotments of Tier 4 and 5 units by one session each. We also are limiting sessions for seminars, which in future will get only one session in November (down from two) and one session in June. This year and last year, any program unit participating in June gets additional November sessions but that might change so that the total allotment of a unit's sessions is split between between June and November.

d. June 2025 meeting update. There are now about 275 registrants (and 235 people are presenting). There were around 220 proposals for the June meeting, with 120 accepted (63%). Preceding the June meeting, we are offering a free day of workshops (see link on website). The

June meeting has 10 sponsors, including the Wabash Center, which bought naming rights (thanks to Senior Events Coordinator Roxana Dondera). There will be fewer sessions than last year. Most unit chairs are supportive but only about 30% of units signed on to participate, a slight decrease from last year. Some have commented that the time cost is too much.

e. November 2025 meeting update. There were 3325 proposals, with about 1100 accepted (33%). About 1500 people have registered so far. We will be paying close attention to the travel issues that participants might face.

f. De-centering/recentering. We are trying to de-center the November meeting through the June meeting and YRP. The single Call for Papers and selection process also helps; people whose proposals are declined for the November meeting might end up presenting at the June meeting, which then gains prestige and significance in relation to academic credentials.

g. AI. One program unit this year (out of 160) said they received a proposal they thought was done by AI. The Program Committee will create a statement against use of AI in proposals. (We also will need also an AI policy for Religious Studies News and Reding Religion.)

#### **IV. Preview of June Sessions and Annual Business Meeting (Schippert)**

Please register for the June meeting if you have not.

The business meeting will be held on Tuesday 6/24, 7:00 p.m. Eastern Time.

Contact Schippert if you have additional agenda items.

#### **V. Updates on initiatives (Prasad and Schippert)**

a. Religious literacy guidelines. The AAR is updating these, and President Prasad is in conversation with the Boniuk Institute at Rice University about their similar efforts. Their aim is to generate not just literacy but tolerance and respect - a good example of a university getting interested in doing more public facing work.

b. IRB. As discussed in January, we are exploring the possibility of an AAR IRB. We hope to learn more from Interfaith Voices for Reproductive Justice (IVRJ) which has created its own IRB with HHS approval.

c. Religion in America at age 250. The AAR is in a coalition of organizations that are promoting a critical look at religion in U.S. history. Executive Director Schippert notes that while historians have been addressing this topic for a long time, scholars of religion have tended to avoid it due to its association with the "Christian nation" question. Executive Director Schippert has invited a couple of folks to suggest programming; this will probably lead to some webinars.

d. ACLS micro-grants. One grant supports our Academic Labor and Contingent Faculty Committee (co-chaired by Patrick Reyes); the second will fund a pre-conference workshop for contingent faculty as a pre-conference workshop in November.

#### **VII. Board *in camera* session: Annual Evaluation of Executive Director (Schneider)**

##### **Motion 6: To accept the positive evaluation report.**

Seconded and passed unanimously

The meeting adjourned at 4 p.m. Eastern Time.

Respectfully submitted  
Kathleen Sands  
Secretary to the Board