American Academy of Religion
Board of Directors
Virtual Meeting
January 24-25, 2026

Minutes

Present: Jacob Barrett, Elise Edwards, Ann Gleig, Patrick Reyes, Nikia Robert, Walid Saleh, Darla Schumm, Kathleen Sands, Laurel Schneider, Angela Sims, Matthew Vaughan, Heather White.

Ex officio = Claudia Schippert, Nicholé Franklin.

Note: All board discussions and materials in basecamp are confidential.

I. Call to Order. The meeting was called to order by President Laurel Schneider at noon EST.

II. Welcome (President Laurel Schneider)

Motion 1 - to approve the agenda.
Seconded and approved unanimously

Motion 2: to approve the minutes of November 2025 Board meeting
Seconded and approved unanimously.

Introduction of Directors

III. President's Report (Laurel Schneider)

a. Strategic Planning Task Force (chaired by Laurel) is completing its work. Please review the documents in Basecamp (graphic on priorities; written statement; written statement plus implementation ideas). These will be our main topic of discussion in tomorrow's meeting.
b. Presidential theme - FUTURE/S - if we can't imagine it, we can't build it. This includes addressing the present crisis in religious studies and theological education. Working in concert with Amy Defibaugh (AAR Director of Programs and Publications)
c. President plenaries. For one session, Laurel has secured an agreement from Deborah Archer (national president of ACLU) to deliver a keynote address.
d. Other presidential activities. Laurel will be planning presidential webinars, which include a webinar on using the Religious Studies Toolbox; a gathering of university or association presidents with backgrounds in Religious Studies (like Laurie Patton); a discussion of careers beyond the academy (hosted by the Applied Religious Studies Committee). At the June online meeting, we may offer an event for the leadership of tier four and five program units to discuss the future of their subfields; this could evolve into a series spread out over several months. Laurel also plans to attend regional meetings when schedules permit this.

IV. Executive Director's Report (Claudia Schippert)

a. The 2025 Academy Report. Please see the full report in Basecamp. Points listed below amplify the written report:

- Institutional memberships. Important to get the current members to renew, and to recruit more. The financial cost of these to the institutions is more than most of the benefits currently used by institutional members. Therefore, institutional memberships must be understood also as a form of support/sponsorship for the AAR. *BoD members please reach out to institutions you're connected with, asking them to consider institutional memberships*.
- Advocacy initiatives intensified this year, with one newsletter per month focusing on these. We also have offered advocacy in relation to immigration and religious freedom: a special session at the November Annual Meeting in Boston, a statement posted on our website and links to resource materials via Religious Studies News and the AAR website.
- Fundraising campaign (completed in December 2025) increased the overall donations in the year by more than 100% compared to 2024. Special thanks to Laurel Schneider, Leela Prasad, and Deena Pence for their personal efforts, and to every member of the board for contributing. We will plan regular fundraising campaigns, aiming to foster a culture of giving among AAR members.
- In memoriam. In past years, a slide show on prominent members who had passed away was offered in the Annual Business Meeting in November. Since shifting the business meeting to June, we have needed to find a new mode of memorialization. Beginning with the 2025 Academy report, memorials will be presented in the Academy Report and on the website.
- Grant-supported programming. The November 2025 Annual Meeting offered several events supported by successful grants (one on American Buddhism, a networking meeting for publicly engaged work in religious studies, and a workshop on guidance on more equitable approaches to hiring contingent faculty

b. Upcoming webinars. Webinars of 2025 have heightened the value of the AAR for membership and offered our expertise to the public during live webinars. We have several webinars already planned for 2026, including a four-month series on religion in America at 250 (intended to supplement or correct official accounts).
c. Cuts in AAR staffing due to financial constraints. Two staff positions have been eliminated; remaining staff are now stretched to capacity. As another cost-saving measure, the staff will have only an online, not in-person, retreat this year. (also see Section V below for cuts related to Reading Religion).
d. June Annual Meeting. We are radically reducing registration fees in hopes of improving attendance in 2026.
e. Religious Literacy guidelines. Efforts to secure grants for re-doing our religious literacy guidelines have not succeeded, so we are pivoting to work with public religion centers.
f. Partnerships with other scholarly societies. The International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR): AAR members can participate in its regional groups. The IAHR is interested in scheduling panels about the global study of religion at our June and November Annual Meetings. Those will be good opportunities for us to explore this partnership. The American

Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) is an excellent resource, providing information affecting all learned societies and professional associations. The National Humanities Association (NHA) lobbies the government and pools resources for the humanities. We want to get more of our members involved in National Humanities Advocacy Days.

g. Board of Directors elections. The Governance and Leadership Development Committee will soon meet to discuss the slate of nominations for next board elections. Please consider nominating colleagues (using the online nominations system on our website, deadline is February 2nd.). The following positions need to be replaced: Vice President, Secretary, At-Large Director with assignment to Program Committee, Contingent Faculty Director, Regions Director. All of this has been circulated to members in a recent newsletter and is available on our website.

V. Program Committee Report (Ann Gleig)

a. A written report was made available to the Board. Topics covered: Programming (scholarship series, mentoring, orientation for program unit leadership); Related Scholarly Organizations (RSO) (proposals and renewals); AI policy; International Development and Religion (an RSO ended by committee vote); revision of Program Unit Review Process; 2026 Annual Meetings (June and November).

Motion 3: From the Program Committees: to offer a 5-year renewal of the following RSO's: Religion in An Age of Science; Societe Internationale d'Etude sur Alfred Loisy.
Seconded and approved unanimously.

b. June 2025 Annual Meeting. There was a 12% decline in participation at this (our second) online meeting. Participant comments show that they really valued this meeting; the problems largely concerned cost and timing. This year we are altering one variable by radically reducing registration fees. These new fees do not meet the expense of the meeting, however.

c. November 2025 Annual Meeting. Very good attendance and very positive feedback on the conference as a whole, especially the plenary sessions and the special session on immigration.

d. AI policy. In its meeting last weekend, the Program Committee devoted significant time and care to creating an AI policy. The distinction between AI editing and AI content is important, inter alia, to provide access to people for whom English is a second language. Also, the policy is intended to avoid placing too much pressure on program chairs by allowing them (within these parameters) to make their own decisions. Some units will be less accepting of AI use than others. In future meetings, the Program Committee will continue to revisit its AI policy. The policy adopted by the Program Committee (not requiring board approval) is as follows:
"At the time of submission, authors must fully indicate in the proposal their use of all content (whether text, images, data, or other) created by an AI tool. AI tools used for editing do not need to be cited. Authors are responsible for ensuring their work is their own, is accurate, and does not use the work of others without permission when needed and without attribution in all cases. Acceptance or rejection of proposals that use AI tools for content creation is at the discretion of individual program units. This policy also applies to full papers and annual meeting presentations for the Online June and In-person November Annual Meetings."

VI. **Financial Overview and Discussion (CFO/COO Nicholé Franklin and Treasurer Nikia Robert**). Documents are available in Basecamp.

a. Background information for newer board members

- Staffing (14, working remotely since 2020 with same or better productivity).
- Luce Center (endowed by Luce foundation; the endowment covers major repairs). We co-own the Luce Center with SBL and share via tenancy-in-common. The land is leased from Emory for $1/year (lease up in 2027). To sustain the building, we rent space - mostly to Emory departments, but they are less in need of it at present. We will start using a commercial real estate agent to seek outside rentals. If rentals don't suffice, we will need a Plan B. We may need to figure out the value of the property and contemplate selling it.
- Affiliation with Emory University - for a 6.12% service fee, Emory provides access to university resources, management of our payroll and benefits (including lower cost health insurance), building access and security. Emory pays our staff and the AAR reimburses Emory. The affiliation agreement between AAR and Emory has expired. Emory has provided a new draft agreement, which we will review.
- Collaboration with SBL. The AAR and SBL are distinct corporate entities. We collaborate on the Luce Center, the job board, and (through a joint management agreement) the November Annual Meeting. We share reports on joint activities, but not AAR financials.
- Regions. We have 9 regions (down from 10). Those regions operate as individual LLCs with their own bank accounts, subsidiary to the AAR. Like the Board of Directors, regions are led by volunteers. Nicholé and her assistant give their support.
- Fiscal cycle, planning, and reporting. Our fiscal year runs from July 1- June 30. Figures for the November Annual Meeting of 2025 are reflected in our FY 2026 financials. There is a steady stream of revenue from April to late October (our main sources of revenue being membership and annual meeting registration fees). But we have a dry period from January to March, sometimes resulting in cash flow problems and apparent budget discrepancies. It takes until February to record all revenues and costs from the previous November Annual Meeting. Our budget planning then begins, but it is not until May that we know what the November Annual Meeting will really cost. A full budget is presented to the board in June of each year, to be approved at the June Board of Directors meeting. Because salaries are a major expense, we chart the uses of staff time and build this into our budget.
- Investment portfolios. We have two portfolios. One is the Luce Endowment, owned jointly with the SBL. The other, called "investments," is owned solely by the AAR and managed by Truist based on socially responsible investment policies. CFO/COO Nicholé Franklin's report to the Board of Directors is about the Truist portfolio.
- Drawdown of investments. Because the AAR operates at a deficit, we do need to draw on our investment to cover operating expenses. In 2002, the board instituted the policy that we can draw down no more than 5% of the three-year rolling average of this fund per year. In 2024, the Finance and Audit Committee revised this policy to allow our management to draw up to 10% of the 3-year rolling average before needing to inform the Board of Directors. In practice, however, Claudia and Nicholé talk with the Finance and Audit Committee before doing anything not projected in the budget.

b) Current financial position and projections for FY 26. Our market value is down 1.1 million from previous year. Our drawdown was particularly high due to costs of a new management system and website. In 2026, we project that our drawdown will be less than last year's. But we will still need to drawdown 12% to cover an anticipated $769K deficit. *Takeaway: we really need to increase revenue, decrease expenses, and draw down much less from our investments*.

c) Measures taken to cut costs and raise revenues. To cut costs, we have eliminated two staff positions, ended in-person January board meetings; reduced use of supportive technologies, computer operation costs and computer maintenance costs; re-negotiated contracts. To raise revenue, we increased membership fees, exhibitor rates, and ran a fundraising campaign.

d) Reading Religion (RR) Program. This program costs $182 K a year and, despite the efforts of our current and prior Executive Director, is not financially sustainable. The decision has been taken to wind it down in the coming months, archiving the content. Ending RR will reduce our deficit to 19% - not enough to solve our financial problems, but a move in the right direction. Very regretfully, this will involve laying off two staff members. It also diminishes our ability to carry out a key mission and will no doubt draw criticism from members. Our staff will need the Board of Directors to support this unfortunate but unavoidable decision.
e) Treasurer's Report (Nikia Robert). The three goals identified by the Finance and Audit Committee are transparency, planning and creating new revenue streams.

VII. Committee Reports

a. Graduate Student Committee (Jacob Barrett).
The Graduate Student Committee had its first 2026 meeting and identified initiatives for 2026: get an international student on the committee; survey the needs of international students; create a June session (perhaps in connection with the International Connections Committee); and launch a new peer mentorship program that will offer four zoom sessions a year and allow participants to break out based on stage of grad work.

b. Regional Council (Matthew Vaughan)
Regions are in a pretty good spot. The big picture agreement with the AAR management has been effected. No major structural issues emerged at the most recent Regional Council meeting, although it is still challenging to find good people to fill the leadership positions. Regional conferences had good attendance in 2025. All regions will have meetings in 2026; Eastern International will meet at McGill. Matthew plans to go to the Western regional meeting. He suggests that upcoming Regional Council meetings be hybrid - this improved attendance and participation in 2025. The Regions Forum at the November Annual Meeting (distinct from the Regional Council) has poor attendance and should be discontinued. Matthew is seeking in this group for people who might accept a nomination to replace him when he rotates off the Board of Directors this year.

c. Academic Labor and Contingent Faculty Committee (Patrick Reyes)
This committee is revising the statement created in 2015 to define academic labor and formulate a kind of bill of rights. They are puzzling about who would uphold this bill of rights. Institutions don't. Should/can the committee do it? Another concern of the committee is the potential effects of new federal policies on the health insurance that contingent faculty are now able to get through the AAR. Patrick has found three people on the committee who might accept nomination to replace him when he rotates off the Board of Directors this year.

d. Status Committee Caucus (Heather White)
Status committees had listening sessions at the November Annual Meeting. Many are concerned about repercussions of the current federal attacks on DEI. Nikki Young (former chair of Status Committee Caucus) will visit the Summit meeting in March and, as a DEI officer, may be able to shed light. Status committee members will miss their biannual in-person summit but

understand that AAR's financial constraints dictate that the summit will need to be done virtually. Status committees are thinking that mentoring, although traditionally offered by tenure-track people, might sometimes be better done by people in more similar professional situations. Status committees are also re-thinking some underattended events at the November Annual Meeting. Finally, they are asking how trans members of the AAR might be better represented and served.

The meeting was adjourned for the day at 5 p.m. EST.

Sunday, January 25

Present: Jacob Barrett, Elise Edwards, Patrick Reyes, Walid Saleh, Darla Schumm, Kathleen Sands, Laurel Schneider, Angela Sims, Matthew Vaughan, Heather White, Ann Gleig
Ex officio: Claudia Schippert, Nicholé Franklin.
Absent: Nikia Robert.

The meeting was reconvened by President Schneider at noon EST.

VIII. Strategic Planning Task Force Report (Laurel Schneider) Documents with a draft coming from the taskforce were shared electronically.

a. Laurel chaired this committee, which convened in 2024 and included Emilie Townes, Angela Sims, Brian Pennington and Daniel Fisher-Livne, plus AAR staff Claudia Schippert (Executive Director), Nicholé Franklin (CFO/COO) and Amy Defibaugh (Director of Programs and Publications). The Task Force report stresses the AAR's unique powers of convening, recognition, and programming in support of the academic study of religion. It proposes five strategic goals with associated objectives. All the goals depend on achieving financial security, which is therefore first and foundational goal. To meet this goal in this difficult period will require that the plan be nimble and adaptable.

In a separate document, the task force provides examples of steps that might be taken to implement these goals. The actual implementation steps will be determined and conducted by the AAR staff, under the direction of Claudia Schippert. Claudia shared a draft of a working spread sheet that lays out implementation steps and will eventually indicate which staff will be involved in specific areas over next 5 years, with checkpoints/metrics to assess progress. Reports about progress at these checkpoints will help the Board of Directors assess progress toward the goals.

Motion 4: to accept the five strategic goals laid out by task force for 2026-2031:
Goal 1: Ensure organizational stability and sustainability; Goal 2: Increase the value of belonging to the AAR; Goal 3: Create opportunities for professional connections that are sustainable and accessible; Goal 4: Foster scholarly and teaching excellence in all areas of the field; Goal 5: Advocate for Religious Studies and scholars of religion in academic and public contexts.

Seconded and approved unanimously.

IX. Other business

Reminders and Upcoming Events (Claudia Schippert)

Please complete the Conflict of Interest form (basecamp) and return to Claudia asap).

Upcoming webinars - Religion in America at 250 (see above), workshop on navigating Papers system.

The Call for Papers (CFP) for 2026 Annual Meetings is now out.

Board members - try to go to regional meetings, at least the one in your area. Also consider sponsoring someone (e.g., a grad student) to go to the June online Annual Meeting.

Reactions to recent ICE violence in Minneapolis (and elsewhere)

Executive Director will reach out to AAR people in Minneapolis, also on behalf of the Board of Directors.

A suggestion was made to use on the AAR website photos of peace actions of clergy (e.g., clergy kneeling in street; Buddhist peace march).

A suggestion was made to explore a possible webinar on organizing for non-violent resistance (e.g., invite Maria Stefan, keynote speaker from 2024 AM?)

The meeting was adjourned by President Schneider at 3 p.m. EST.

Respectfully submitted by
Kathleen Sands
Secretary to the Board of Directors