

American Academy of Religion  
New England – Canadian Maritimes Region (NEMAAR)  
Regional Development Grant Proposal  
July 1, 2020  
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## **Bringing Back the NERDS: Relaunching the New England Religion Discussion Society (NERDS)**

### **Project Description**

This project would officially re-launch the NERDS (New England Religion Discussion Society) network, starting Fall 2020. NERDS will construct opportunities for cross-disciplinary discussion and research collaboration, fostering a vibrant and engaged community of religion scholars. The project includes creating a cross-disciplinary leadership team, a database of religion scholars in New England, a consistent virtual presence, and hosting two informal gatherings.

### **Background and Rationale**

For nearly 10 years, from 1998 to 2007, Hartford Seminary's Hartford Institute for Religion Research hosted the New England Religion Discussion Society (NERDS), an informal gathering of social scientists, religion scholars, and academically-oriented clergy to engage in a series of conversations and discussion of research, trends, and papers-in-process. In addition to the exchange of ideas, NERDS also functioned as an important network tie for the region's religion scholars. Held 2-3 times per year, NERDS provided a gathering place for fellowship with cross-disciplinary scholars and practitioners who seldom interacted outside of annual professional meetings. Past participants were members of AAR, ASR, RRA/SSSR, ASA and other, or no, professional association. The gatherings stimulated cross-disciplinary and applied conversation about religion in the New England region.<sup>1</sup>

By 2007/2008 and the economic downturn, this regular gathering was discontinued at Hartford Institute for Religion Research. The effort to gather a group of scholars together was partly picked up by Mark Silk at Trinity College, thanks in part to a grant at his Greenberg Center. This gathering is less intentional and is primarily focused around the interests of the Greenberg Center rather than those of individual scholars in the New England region.

We at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research see a need for reviving our earlier practice. We see this as an important cross-disciplinary conversation, providing a way for cross-fertilizing of ideas between disciplinary silos, that could also build on the work of NEMAAR to construct meaningful and sustained modes of cross-disciplinary scholarly collaboration. Additionally, NERDS could serve to strengthen the participation of religion scholars in New England in the AAR and in NEMAAR.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/about/nerds.html> for a summary of previous discussion topics.

## **Purpose and Aims**

Based on the history and vision of NERDS, the project has the following aims:

### **1. Build a sustainable, engaging community of religion scholars in New England**

This project will create a broad and interdisciplinary network of collaborative, engaged religion scholars across New England, initiating interdisciplinary exchange within and between the fields of research on religion. It is our experience that scholars in the region are often not aware of the research and activities of others working in the same vicinity. Many faculty in the region do not have the kind of intellectual support and critique they desire from like-minded researchers. Although many would benefit from between-meeting gatherings and opportunities for sharing resources and ideas, few institutional spaces exist to facilitate this kind of personal contact and collaboration. Re-launching NERDS will foster a community of religion scholars that strengthens the connections and momentum that is achieved at the annual AAR and NEMAAR conferences, in an ongoing and regular manner. NERDS will form this network by creating a database of a broad and eclectic group of social scientists, religion scholars, and academically-oriented clergy in New England and through combining face-to-face gatherings with a robust virtual presence.

### **2. Promote scholarly collaboration for cross-disciplinary, innovative, and applied research**

NERDS can provide a context for the kind of exchange that can create collaborative research relationships, generate new research ideas, and foster new research undertakings related to the applied study of religion. It promotes opportunities for academic exchange across a variety of disciplines and specializations while providing a venue for both collaboration and critical review. NERDS can also provide opportunities for informal mentorship of emerging scholars who will benefit from the expertise of senior scholars.

### **Statement on Activities: Overview**

This project is region specific, due to its shoe-string budget and intentional focus on creating informal opportunities for face-to-face connection. NERDS is a practical implementation of the purpose of the AAR regions, particularly related to networks of sharing for local scholars by strengthening greater personal contact, local accessibility, and opportunities for academic exchange, cooperative research, and leadership development. Thus, it is focused on scholars in the New England region, but with a model that can be implemented and adapted by other regional groups. NERDS aligns with the previous goals of the Mid-Atlantic Region and the Southwest Region, in their previously submitted grant proposals.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> NERDS is similar to two previously awarded grant proposals, but is focused on strengthening the network of religion scholars in the New England region. It aligns with the goals of the Mid-Atlantic Region's 2018-2019 Regional Development Grant "Community Building Workshop Series: Pathway Forward Towards A More Vibrant, Innovative, and Engaging Community of Scholars in the Mid-Atlantic Region" and the Southwest Region's 2016-2017 Regional Development Grant "How Might the Region Become a Stronger and More Meaningful Presence in the Scholarly and Professional Lives of its Members?"

However, one of the main lessons many academic institutions and researchers have learned in this era of COVID-19 is that virtual spaces are also highly useful in creating community and networks. As such, this project combines a face-to-face and virtual presence that allows it to be highly adaptable to the social distancing requirements over the next year. Additionally, the NERDS model can be implemented and adapted to other regional groups.

NERDS will create a cross-disciplinary network through gatherings, a reliable virtual presence, social media, and a website. Below is a summary of the main components of the project:

### **Recruit a Leadership Team**

The Hartford Institute of Religion Research faculty will recruit a cross-disciplinary leadership team of religion scholars in the region. These leaders will promote NERDS among their professional networks, will support the work of maintaining an active virtual presence, and will share decision-making. The leadership team will meet via zoom to plan the re-launch of NERDS.

### **Create a Database of Religion Researchers in New England**

NERDS will establish and maintain a broad and eclectic database of social scientists, religion scholars, and academically-oriented clergy in the region. The Hartford Institute for Religion Research faculty and staff will complete these work, in partnership with the leadership team.

### **Establish a Virtual Presence**

The project includes the creation of a NERDS logo and website. Additionally, the project will create a Facebook group and Twitter account to cultivate a sense of momentum, share information, and interact with members and like-minded researchers. Depending on the trajectory of COVID-19 over the next year, NERDS may include opportunities for virtual discussion and conversation, via zoom.

### **Host Gatherings**

The project's asynchronous virtual components will be supplemented with two synchronous gatherings. These informal gatherings will provide opportunities to discuss current issues, research projects and plans, and catch up with colleagues with similar interests. We tentatively plan to hold the first gathering virtual, via zoom, in November 2020. This will be the soft launch of NERDS, followed by a face-to-face gathering in April 2021, dependent on COVID-19 guidelines. We will adjust the modality or timeline as needed.

The Regional Development Grant will provide the seed money to re-launch NERDS, providing the necessary funding for establishing a virtual presence and creating a database. The funding will also provide initial momentum to the group by providing refreshments and offsetting the travel costs associated with the first face-to-face gathering. Because NERDS is a low overhead endeavor that will achieve continued support from the Hartford Institute from Religion Research, NERDS can easily be sustained in the years ahead.

### **Timeline**

July 2020 – October 2020

Recruit members to the Leadership Team

Create a database of religion researchers in New England

Create a logo, website, and establish a virtual presence  
Plan and design the Fall Gathering

November 2020

Host the first gathering virtually

December 2020 - March 2021

Plan and design the Spring Gathering

Maintain an active virtual presence

Hold additional virtual meet-ups, as needed

April 2021

Spring Gathering held (perhaps in conjunction with the NEMAAR annual meeting)

Compose final report for AAR Regions Committee

### **Budget**

#### **Database, Website, and Social Media**

Database: Compilation and Data Entry \$400

Website: Logo and Hosting \$1500

#### **Leadership Team Stipend**

\$100 each, 5 leaders \$500

#### **Spring Gathering (assumes 20 participants)**

Participants' Mileage Reimbursement: \$1,000

Food and Refreshments: \$500

**TOTAL \$3,900**

### **Grant Proposal Developers, HIRR faculty**

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