MINUTES
AAR Board of Directors Meeting
Atlanta, GA / February 17 – 18, 2018

Present: David Gushee, Jack Fitzmier, Kimberly Connor, Kathryn McClgomery, Grace Ji-Sun Kim, Katherine Downey, Kerry Danner, Deborah Minor, Amy Yandell, José Cabezón, Kecia Ali, Laurie Patton. Excused: Jonathan Sarna, Leela Prasad, Rachel Toombs

I. Call to Order (Saturday, February 17, 2018)

David Gushee, President, called the meeting to order at 9:03 a.m. David led introductions of new members and reviewed the agenda.

II. Approval of 11/17/17 Minutes

Motion 1
To approve the 11/17/17 BoD Meeting Minutes. Passed unanimously as amended.

III. President’s Report

Preview of Presidential Plenaries: David introduced the theme for his presidency and noted how it aligns with themes of prior leaders: “Religious Studies: Civic Opportunities, Responsibilities, and Risks.” He also described the process of planning for his Presidential Address and the accompanying plenary sessions. For public life/engagement, he has set 2 sessions: one, a panel with the 5 top religion journalists in U.S. who will discuss the state of religion journalism and the role played by academics in supporting credible journalism; second, Jim Wallis, of Sojourners, will speak about his journey as a public voice on religion. David anticipates a third plenary about scholars who have paid a price for responsible scholarship. Who to invite remains undecided but he welcomes suggestions. In his Presidential address, David will propose that there is a crisis in white American Christianity and will explore African American theologies and ethics as way to interrogate the tradition in which he was raised. A “theme” is new to the AAR (beginning with Zoloth presidency) and now is being highlighted. David intends to increase the theme’s visibility and its connection to meeting planning. Laurie announced that her theme will be “The Academy in the World.” Both the President and the President-elect noted how their themes advance the AAR’s commitment to public engagement as expressed in the new mission statement.

Request for Public Statement on the “Travel Ban”: The Board considered a letter from the Contemporary Islam Group that asked for a strong and updated statement from the AAR condemning the Trump Administration travel ban. Jack reminded us that AAR policy regarding any statement (self-crafted or signed-on) is that it must be presented to EC and then the Board. Although a year ago the AAR offered a statement, Kecia explained that the group wants an updated statement that identifies specific harms that affects community as well as a pledge to sign on to any amicus brief that might emerge in legal challenges to the ban. Laurie cautioned careful vetting of any brief the AAR signs. In considering the request, the Board recognized that the group’s concerns raise a larger question: How
do we make the AAR accessible when the country is not welcoming scholarly exchange? The AAR needs to think more capacious about how to include members.

No clear and immediate answer emerged but Jack affirmed that inclusivity is part of the Strategic Plan. Jack recommended a response to the group affirming the AAR’s interest and commitment. Deborah added that this is a fundraising opportunity to support electronic communication at the AAR to provide more inclusivity. The AAR needs to consider what it means to be “blocked” and to recognize a legitimate fear of persecution. The Board agreed that the next level is a general statement from the AAR as well as response to the Contemporary Islam group. The Board also recommended establishing a separate fund to help scholars participate via Skype. Kathryn and Kerry drew our attention to other vulnerable members who can’t participate because of local/domestic and financial hardship and the fear of contingent faculty worried about not being renewed. Jack offered that we need to make distinctions among reasons for limiting participation (logistics, costs) and reasons for soliciting funds. The primary challenges lie with the costs of communication set-ups. David proposed that the Board respond to the letter with strong support of an agreement with the concern and a promise to take both public actions—including advocacy and a new statement beyond the ban that speaks to the values at stake and the impact on scholarship and members—and also offer to explore an internal institutional response that addresses the possibilities of expanding the accessibility of the meetings, Annual and Regional.

The public policy and the statement will be crafted by EC and will invite the participation of the Contemporary Islam group. Kecia also recommended that the principal authors of the letter to the board be consulted. The statement will be released through all means by March 30th. Jack will explore the tech options and what it will take to increase accessibility to meetings for impacted members.

Motion 2

Update on Executive Director Search [Executive Session]: David discussed the moment the board is facing with the change of leadership after 12 years and described how he is preparing for the moment in accordance with the Strategic Plan. The search is nearing the end. Three members of the search committee were present—Laurie, David, Kecia; others include EC members when formed—Eddie Glaude, Michael McNally, Jonathan Sarna. Consultant Terri Thiessen has staffed the search. In mid-March the search committee will meet with four finalists, not to be named. The Search Committee affirms that all could do the job well. They hope to narrow to 1 candidate by late April (earlier if possible). The finalist would meet and talk with staff in next round and not long after that we hope to conclude and have a new ED by July 1.

The Board discussed deeply the risks and rewards of reaching out to additional candidates in light of demographic concerns about the finalist pool. David agreed to accept additional recommendations. (Two names were collected and forward to the consultant.)
The Board anticipates an ongoing, principled conversation around diversity and skill sets of AAR leaders and staff.

David and Laurie will assist in managing a clear transition from the retiring ED to the new one.

IV. Finance Report

Deborah provided a current budget update that drew attention to the increase in membership. She also explained the statement of position that indicated resources were down because of spending grant money but that resources will be transferred from investment accounts to provide sufficient unrestricted funds for expenses. She also explained depreciation as tied to software and discussed how funds are distributed and shared with SBL. Upcoming, the Board will be asked to approve a legal statement that puts in place safeguards for both organizations, which enjoy a congenial relationship. Deborah and Jack both cited the AAR’s socially responsible investing (SRI) with SunTrust. Jack expressed the intention to build an investment committee to recommend how to move bonds to SRI. Laurie recommended the AAR investigate ESG (environmental, social, governance factors) in investment decisions. Overall the AAR is in a very healthy financial situation. David concluded the conversation by lifting up Deborah Minor’s excellent work as the AAR’s CFO in light of her forthcoming retirement.

Motion 3

To approve Jack Fitzmier, Deborah Minor, and Amy Parker as signatories for the AAR’s Sun Trust investment account. Unanimously approved.

V. Update on the Strategic Plan

Amy Yandell explained that the AAR staff is working on preparing a visual presentation of the Strategic Plan and developing a more aggressive schedule for the Annual Meeting that includes a bigger presence on social media. Program committees were sent a social media survey and asked for best practices in interactions with the public and the membership. The Board expressed a preference for shorter sessions in order to include more presenters. Amy explained that the AAR intends to open a Zoom account to offer program units the ability to host webinars, etc. Overall, the intention is to develop the AAR beyond the Annual Meeting to be a “365” organization as outlined in the Strategic Plan.

Another initiative to promote the public understanding of religion in accordance with the Strategic Plan is to develop a cadre of members to train others on Islamophobia. Jack reported that a similar initiative at the Boston Annual Meeting resulted in 24 participants (15 speakers) and with the partnership of the Wabash Center, will be expanded for the 2018 Annual Meeting and another occasion with an emphasis on pedagogy. Steve Herrick is also working on grant funding for programming related to the refugee crisis. Previously, the AAR received $34,000 in Luce funding for the topic to be addressed at the 2017 Annual Meeting which drew 200 participants. Also, the AAR hopes to create a “religion reference book” for law enforcement officials. Jean Gallagher and Dianne Moore are preparing the proposal. The AAR intends to increase the number of sessions for Applied
Religious Studies organizations and groups outside of academia and to increase in scope and number sessions focusing on career development.

Amy suggested that the AAR sponsor (at a level to be determined) the “Imagine PhD” project, a career development tool for PhD students that helps with skill development and resources. Amy described Imagine PhD as a professional organization with a volunteer staff. They have helped 6000 users since launching 10/17. José encouraged us to use the platform and then see how it may be useful. The Board had an extended conversation on the challenges facing those who seek “careers for PhDs.” The Board recognized that the industry is changing and new efforts are not yet sophisticated enough to address more fully the relevance of the humanities. Laurie recommends we have conversation about job prep and PhD training. How can AAR position itself to advise not just students but faculty and fill in for loss of mentorship? Kathryn asked the AAR to work at departmental level. Grace recommended student groups as taking up this task. José recommend sharing narratives of successful careers outside of academic; Amy is going to lift up member stories.

The final consideration of the Strategic Plan was a focus on membership and how it can be increased, especially among super-lapsed members. The Board is considering a Membership Development Task Force. As part of this process Member News is being updated and will highlight a benefit each issue. Staff is currently pricing out each benefit and who uses and exploring affinity benefits as a possibility. So far 700 members have responded to the member survey that closes March 9, 2018. AAR staff are also considering new ways to develop membership (as rolling, bucket, adjusted dues structure). The staff already is improving methods and tools to use in member development, including: shifting away from Dropbox to a free service, offering content themes for Member News (that could that align with the President’s theme), improving calendar functions, conducting a content inventory of website.

VI. Digest of Committee Reports

José Cabezon offered a digest of Committee Reports. He noted that most reports included questions about vacant positions on committees and asked the Board to reflect on this process in consultation with Elizabeth Hardcastle. He also expressed a concern for oversight of STFs [I don’t remember what this stands for]. Kathy pointed out how Regions could support the Program Committee in this process. David asks the Board to review all of the Committee Reports in detail and note what stands out as successful. In discussing contingent faculty, the main concern is their relationship to the Status Committees where they should have representation. This led to a call for a “summit” for status groups every two years, beginning in 2019 to discuss issues. David proposed Status Committees and the Academic Labor and Contingent faculty committee meet one time to see what emerges.

Motion 4

Status committees should reconvene for a summit in early 2019 in collaboration with the Academic Labor and Contingent Faculty working group. To be planned by leaders of each entity and AAR liaisons. Amy Yandell will coordinate until her departure and identify a successor. The Chairs of Regions and Program Committees also will be represented. Passed unanimously.

The Academic Relations Committee asked the Board to approve the creation of task force to develop guide for reviewing programs in religion and theology. The Board encourages advocacy for religion
and theology departments with a guide that is tailored to specific types of institutions. The committee also reported a committee member whose inactivity merits a substitute.

José noted that the American Lectures in the History of Religions Committee is overrepresented by Abrahamic religions and recommended Duncan Williams be included.

The Graduate Student Committee asked for money for the grad student reception and an exhibit, an idea the Board found insufficiently developed. Jack will ask the committee for clarification, especially in terms of art contributors and public participation.

The International Connections Committee expressed concern with the vetting of grant applications. Jack will respond with a letter about the unrealized potential of this committee.

The Public Understanding of Religion Committee, which chooses the Marty award, wants to change criteria. The also expressed concern about the staff liaison departure. David and Jack will write the committee to assure them that presidential line appreciates that they are the group aligned to help develop the new mission and the Board will be in conversation with them. The Board recognized that this was a strong committee eager to work in moving ideas from theoretical to practical but that all AAR constituencies should participate in advancing the mission. Laurie suggested we survey the AAR membership. All agreed that PUR will require full time staff support.

The Status of People with Disabilities Committee wants to formalize the current procedures. Jack will inform them that such is already the policy.

The Status of Women in the Profession Committee noted spike in anecdotal complaints of sexual harassment. They encourage a statement on conduct and a hotline for reports during meeting. The Board suggested capturing information from female members’ experiences of harassment in the post-meeting survey (with assurance of confidentiality). The Board also discussed policies around interviews in hotel rooms and affirmed that best practices and AAR policies will be applied to all organizations that associate with the AAR at the Annual Meeting. The committee also requested that the AAR collect and distribute demographic statistics regarding the membership including the makeup of AAR session panelists to educate members and guide future policy.

Jack will distribute the new report on 2017 demographic data, in conversation with Katherine, Monique, and Nicky. The Board concluded that this request pointed to other types of data gathering that would be helpful (e.g. Regions) and because a comprehensive assessment is the first goal in the strategic plan, the AAR should commence robust movement on tracking numbers and hire staff who can do this work. The AAR intends to release all data on its website. The Board also recommended a repeat of RISE posters and contingent faculty posters. A booth for contingent faculty and a highlighted presence was also suggested. Finally, the Board discussed the Women’s Lounge and Women’s Caucus and referred their comments to the Status of Women in the Profession committee.

The Teaching and Learning Committee needs to choose a teaching award recipient. David will undertake this task and consult with Jack and Amy, hoping to recruit more nominations.
Jack will reach out to the Theological Education Committee to affirm that the Board cares about non-Christian Theology and to ask the committee to be more specific and inclusive as the AAR is currently on that trend. Committee member appointments are in process.

There was no report from several committees so David and Jack will send letters to all chairs to encourage timely submission of reports and to explain the importance of reports and how they are used.

VIII. Program Committee Chair’s Report

The status of RSOs was the main subject of the Program Committee Chair’s report. The BDS conflict at the 2017 Annual Meeting highlighted the need to develop guidelines. The Program Committee developed 2 recommendations resulting from the recent RSO review process: 1. do not renew CTRF; 2. Send an informative email to all RSOs to reaffirm guidelines that establish standards of inclusion in alignment with AAR principles and values. Jack drew attention to what RSOs gain but that we should consider what they contribute to organization. David reminded us of the timing and delicacy of exclusion. The Board discussed how to distinguish mission with faith commitments. The Program Committee will inquire about RSO’s openness to two specific concerns: leadership from non-Christian members; inclusion among members. The Board determined that is was best to begin with dialogue before sending a letter or establishing a policy. Larger issues to be asked about RSOs are part of a larger policy move. David pointed out that this also applies to exhibitors. The AAR’s big tent could include those with religious commitment, and always has. It was suggested that “Additional Meetings” be called “Other Events.” Since CTRF’s application was late, the Board agreed to give a one-year renewal on consideration of the developing policy. All RSOs will receive a letter from the Program Committee chair informing RSOs of upcoming changes to policy in accordance with the development of revised professional conduct statement, with policies that members will be required to assent to with a tick box on registration and membership renewal forms.

VIII. Executive Director’s Report

Jack outlined a sexual harassment complaint from an SBL member about an offense at an RSO event by an AAR member at the 2017 Annual Meeting and reported that the AAR responded to satisfaction of aggrieved. The accused exited the organization. Jack consulted with counsel to get AAR policy aligned with SBL. The Board discussed how to create safe space across venues and with collaborators. Laurie provided deeper institutional context and explained issues of jurisdiction and responsibility. The Board also identified a need to identify someone to do investigations of such claims in the future. Jack will follow up.

Jack also provided a technology update and indicated that a tech audit has led to a Request for Proposals to acquire new products that don’t require the same investment of staff time to build and maintain. Deborah is looking for an affordable AMS—association management system—to be built by AAR or as an off the shelf product. The staff has reviewed 4 live demos; 2 are upcoming. Deborah offered that new systems should drive revenue, member engagement, and ease of staff workload.

Jack also described the new AAR “Book of Knowledge” which was created because of a request from the ED search committee and head hunter as a way to capture institutional memory and ease the
transition to a new ED. It is essentially an “owner’s manual” of how the AAR runs and includes live links throughout. It will be found on the AAR website along with an organizational chart and staff job descriptions that Jack will add.

Jack announced that in agreement with the Board, the AAR has signed on to an AHA letter about Poland’s new law related to Holocaust research.

The meeting was suspended at 5 PM.

The meeting resumed at 8:32 a.m. on February 18, 2018.

IX. Task Force Recommendations.

The Board considered how to build policy from the work of several task forces.

1. Publishing Task Force/Final Report. This was an initiative of Jack to address an issue pertinent to membership that has been neglected. The narrative of the report is complete, but the committee is still waiting on survey results. The Board agreed that it wants to move forward boldly in making a statement on Tenure & Promotion as it relates specially to publishing in new forms of digital media. Jack will ask staff to review what can be done with existing information and committees by way of building a final document that provides guidelines and principles applicable to different types of institutions. The Board received the report with gratitude for the excellent work of the task force and asked Kim to liaise with the task force chair, Ted Vial, as well as Regions and Contingent Faculty reps and staff, to develop the final recommendations and statement.

2. Departmental Review Task Force/Proposal. The task force would work with the Academic Relations committee to review and rewrite the 1999 Departmental Review guide and to offer advice on how to prepare departments and reviewers for the process. José volunteered to join the effort. The Board suggested Mary Hunt, Frank Clooney, and Wallace Best as possible additions to the task force and welcomes other recommendations.

3. Joint Regions Task Force / Proposal. A joint AAR/SBL task force would discuss ways to develop joint regional meetings. David proposes that Kathy, as Regions rep, be lead person for the group and designated Jack, Matt, and 2 others to staff the task force. Kathy recommends a strong national, contingent faculty, and student presence. Kathy will ask Rachel and Kerry to join. Also relevant is the reconfiguration of regions as a way to maximize extension of benefits to reduce costs and accomplish tasks. Reimagining the regions and what they are about can benefit the AAR in multiple ways. Kathryn pointed out that regions are an access point for the program committee. Also relevant to AAR core values are efforts to reduce members’ carbon footprint which regional meetings support. Recognizing regions is part of a 365 way of looking at the AAR. Laurie asked for deep discussion of nature of regionality and its intellectual power, i.e. how to translate into local idiom. David proposed to go high end and invest with Kerry, Kathryn, Kathy, and Rachel as contributors. David will identify and invite members to form the task force.

4. Membership Development Task Force Proposal/ Jack proposed this task force and identified a candidate who will be hired first as an intern but we hope permanently as the staff person to lead this initiative. Rethinking past efforts, this task force would have a time limit and be
assigned specific tasks to perform in an advisory capacity. Matt V. wants member input and to function in ways similar to prior task force efforts on this issue. Amy and Kecia encouraged more diverse representation (including contingent faculty, non-profit organizations, and regional reps) but also offered that the prior task force has already set forth recommendations. Jack suggests that he take a direct approach and ask Matt what he wants, what is best to achieve the goal. David will write note from the board acknowledging Matt’s hard work and thank him for efforts and offer ongoing support. The Board agreed to help develop a list of potential task force members and share them with Jack who will return to the Board with the final configuration of the task force.

As part of this conversation, Amy asked us to address, through a committee or task force, issues of professional development for members. A committee currently advises the employment services but should have a broader charge, as a kind of “member benefit.” Amy encouraged a 365 approach (and the Board suggested using the hashtag slogan “#365”). David pointed out that this effort also speaks to staff development. Jack recognized the importance of this issue but suggested we hold off until staff hires are complete. Kathy offered that perhaps membership merits standing committee status. José recommends that many committees could/should contribute and further suggests these issues be taken to committees and program units. The Board seeks a broader recognition of the concept of membership in which professional development resides and positions membership as a place of common ownership to create an ethos of responsibility among the entire membership. David suggest we have conversations with relevant bodies and staff and if necessary establish a standing committee. The Board will resume this conversation at the November meeting, with special attention to the question of what constitutes “member care.”

5. **Professional Conduct Task Force/Final Report.** The Board recognized that the final report provided an articulate expansion statement of AAR’s core values. The report was received with gratitude and the values statement will be publicized widely and consistently in multiple venues. Kathy suggested a global edit on “faculty” to substitute “scholar.” Laurie offered a friendly amendment that faculty not be used globally to represent AAR members. The Board was encouraged to submit nominations for members will to work on the second piece of specific policy development around professional conduct standards for the new era. Jack, Laurie, David, will contribute to this effort and Laurie will chair group that develops policies. Jack, in his post-ED role, will become the staff/consultant to help develop these policies. Kathryn noted that a sub-committee of the Program Committee is developing standards of conduct and best practices for the Annual Meeting that could contribute to and complement this effort. Kecia encouraged us to have the values statement ready for the annual meeting, even if specific policies are still being developed. The Board recommends the values statement be included as content for the tick box members must mark to register for the Annual Meeting and when renewing membership. Kerry, Kathy, Laurie, and Kecia will confer and revise and share the final statement with the Board.

**Motion 5:** Accept in principle the values statement (to be revised) and to generate on Annual Meeting and Membership registrations a “tick box” for members to mark, indicating they agree to abide by the values statement and accompanying policies. Further, the Board recommends that the values statement serve as the foundation for developing specific policies using the following language: “As a condition of participating in Annual Meeting and/or as a condition of my
membership in the AAR, I agree to abide by the AAR values and current policies as specified (link).” This motion is offered pending legal review of the final statement which will be ready for Board approval by March 15 and available by April 1st for registration. Passed unanimously.

X. Broader Conversations

**RSOs and Professional Conduct:** The Board continued discussing RSO Policies (from above) and agreed that a letter for all RSOs in conformity with values will be forthcoming. This aligns with AAR’s efforts to develop professional conduct standards and offers the opportunity to receive feedback from RSOs. The letter will indicate gratitude for RSO involvement, state our intentions, but will welcome questions and concerns. It will inform RSOs that the AAR is currently reviewing policies in light of its new professional conduct statement. The AAR will also offer RSOs time to adjust if they are flagged as being out of conformity to AAR values and to be responsive. Letter should highlight the benefits of being in a distinctive relationship with AAR. Jose asked why Additional Meetings participants are not being asked to do the same. Jack went further and asked about exhibitors and other allied organizations. The Board suggests we move to language of conduct rather than values. Our policies can enforce conduct supported by values statement. The Board also recognized that often an issue of compliance is moot (why would one join if so in conflict with values?) or premised on exclusion (women’s lounge, for example). Jack will ask the AAR communication director to describe process of developing the values statement and standards and what is coming as a kind of news release—to tell the story of what happened. Kathryn will offer a draft letter to run by board and then proceed. RSO letter will be coordinated with the news release.

**Motion 6:** To approve Laurie Patton as chair and Jack Fitzmier as staff support for a committee that will develop specific policies that align with the values statement. The committee will accommodate Laurie’s context and support her in her many roles. The Board will approve the final constitution of the committee. Passed unanimously.

**Nominations Process:** Jack spoke on the nomination system, which is broken and needs to be rethought from the ground up. The ballot for next fall’s elections will be in place soon; but going forward the process should be rebuilt, in part to safeguard initiatives to promote diversity. Current practices are short-sighted and ineffective. Currently the AAR is filling out holes in existing committees but regular appointments are coming up; this is a consultative process with staff person who helps make decisions. Jack suggests that perhaps the AAR rethink the past-President appointment on the Nominations Committee, a legacy practice from when membership was smaller. By 2019 Jack hopes to have a new process in place. The Board discussed challenges to the nomination process, including the question of what happens to someone who has “lost” in an election. Also, although the President makes many committee appointments, some committees operate under the assumption that they reconstitute the committee with their own choices. Jose observed temptations to be incestuous and further that staff needs to play a role to alert chairs to vacancies.

Kecia observed challenges related to qualifications and eligibility. Jack suggested Sue Pak and Kathy Talvacchia as potential task force members and Grace suggested all Board members offer names to David.
Jack recommended that the new ED should have role in thinking about the Nomination Committee and process. The Board affirmed a spirit of nominations as an active promotion of AAR’s core values and that an appointment should be perceived as conferring prestige. The AAR could offer a seminar that conferred a credential of board development. Laurie suggested a name change to reinforce the prestige of serving, to elevate the role around governance and leadership and to begin to develop a “bench” of talent who can answer the question: “What is an AAR leader?” The Board intends to delineate traits that build sustainability and convey gravitas and to devote considerable energy to this task for next 6 months. This will require a by-law and a culture change. The Board iterated the Nominations Committee’s charge to fill a ballot and to bring slates of candidates that represent the diversity of AAR and provide paths to leadership opportunities for members.

**Motion 7: Change name of the Nominations Committee to Governance and Leadership Development** (recognizing that this will require a change in the by-laws). Passed unanimously.

Jack asked that Board members be available to Amy for conversations about the strategic plan from which she can generate quotes to support the goals of the plan.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:30, a.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kimberly Rae Connor
Secretary of the Board