Minutes
AAR Board of Directors Meeting
Denver, CO/September 15 – 16, 2018

Present: (Board Members) Kecia Ali, José Cabezón, Kimberly Connor, Kerry Danner, Kathy Downey, David Gushee, Alice Hunt, Grace Ji-Sun Kim, Kathryn McClymond, Laurie Patton, Jonathan Sarna, Rachel Toombs, (AAR Staff Members) Sarah Levine, Deborah Minor, Marion Pierre
Excused: Leela Prasad

Call to Order: (Saturday, September 15, 2018) (Agenda I.1)

President David Gushee called the meeting to order at 9 a.m., led introductions, welcomed Alice Hunt to the role of ED, and reviewed the agenda.

Approval of Minutes: (I.2, I.3, I.4)

Approval of February 2018, March 2018, and April 2018 minutes with corrections of name spellings.

Motion 1:
To approve the February, March, and April 2018 BoD Meeting Minutes. Passed unanimously as amended.

President’s Report: (II.1, II.2)
President David Gushee described the process of hiring and facilitating the transition of the new ED which he regarded as a success.

He brought the recommendation from the Executive Committee for appointments of non-Board members to committees of the Board: Finance Committee, Barbara Holmes; Nominations (Governance and Leadership Development) Committee, Keri Day.

Motion 2:
To approve appointment of Barbara Holmes for the Finance Committee and Keri Day for the Nominations (Governance and Leadership Development) Committee Passed unanimously.
President Gushee described his process for appointing members to working groups. While the responsibility for appointment rests, according to the bylaws, squarely with the President, the process includes putting out a call to all members for nominations as well as direct communication with current chairs of the working groups. President Gushee made the final decisions, keeping in mind the recommendations of committee chairs while balancing that with the need to encourage new voices and provide new opportunities for members. As a courtesy to the Board, he shared his 2018 appointments.

President Gushee reported on programming plans for the upcoming Annual Meeting, including the topic of journalism and religion, his chosen speaker, Jim Wallis, and conversations devoted to public engagement in religious studies. He also described his presidential plenary as his perspective on his experiences with evangelical Christianity. He advised that his presidential plenary remarks are not intended to speak for the whole AAR (just as no presidential plenary ever speaks for the entire AAR).

President Gushee praised the work of the Program Committee and cautioned the Board that it should always be prepared for volatile issues to arise.

**Executive Director’s Report:** Part I (III.1, III.2, III.3, III.4.)

Executive Director Alice Hunt began by expressing her enthusiasm for serving in her new role.

She introduced the staff who were present—Sarah, Deborah, and Marion—and praised their contributions to the mission of the AAR.

She made note of the impressive 2018 Grants and Awards List.

She presented the report of the Nominations Committee reports and noted the sound slate of candidates set to stand for election. She believes the elections will go live soon.

The Executive Director reminded the Board of an ongoing sexual harassment complaint that emerged at the February Board meeting. She described the process she and the Grievance Committee are following in handling the case. The board engaged in conversation on related issues such as the need to move forward with the February 2018 Board decision to clarify particulars around the Professional Conduct Policy and Procedure. Status Committee Director Kecia Ali and Chair for the Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession, Monique Moultrie, will share promised information with Alice and President-Elect Laurie Patton as they take on the responsibility of
composing a final and more robust statement. President-Elect Patton explained that the first steps towards developing policy is to clarify the AAR’s relationship with Emory (a process that is underway at this time). Related to the issue of sexual harassment, Contingent Faculty Director, Kerry Danner, announced that the Academic Labor and Contingent Faculty Committee will be co-sponsoring (with the Applied Religious Studies Committee, the Graduate Student Committee, the Committee on the Status of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer Persons in the Profession, the Committee on the Status of People with Disabilities in the Profession, the Committee on the Status of Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Profession, and the Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession) a #MeToo awareness campaign at the Annual Meeting. President-Elect Laurie Patton will be on hand to represent our institutional position.

The Executive Director reminded the Board of the annual memorial list of recently deceased members that is read at the Annual Business Meeting, requesting help in developing a complete list. The Board recommended solicitation of memorial names from the membership.

Using the 2018 membership survey results as a backdrop, the Executive Director asked the Board to consider the staff recommendations for a change in the dues structure. The plan would reduce dues for more impacted members (international, student, low salary, for example) and raise dues for others. She confirmed that the AAR is moving towards a rolling membership process as well as the offering of payment plans for members. The proposed dues structure included the creation a lifetime category which prompted questions for the Board. The Board also raised questions about the proposed membership categories and asked that staff gather additional information before finalizing categories. All agreed that the categories should reflect the dignity of those who work in our field.

**Motion 3:**

The Board approves the proposed new dues structures as presented by the ED and asks AAR staff to further consider the lifetime membership category.

Unanimously approved.

The Board discussed the staff proposal for moving from opt-out on receiving JAAR to an opt-in to receive JAAR.

**Motion 4:**
The Board supports moving to an opt-in paradigm for JAAR subscribers who wish to receive the journal by mail. Further, the Board authorizes the Executive Director to begin exploring with OUP the decision to adopt an opt-in model for JAAR.

Unanimously approved.

Annual meeting pace numbers are strong, with AAR registration at a level consistent with last year’s, even though this year’s annual meeting is out west. (Typically annual meetings on the east coast draw a larger registration.) It was noted that we should be alert to ongoing labor and other issues as related to our hotel contracts. For example, Hyatt, one of our vendors, recently hosted anti-Islamic organization and a labor organization reminded us of cities where strikes will against Marriott, also one of our vendors. If the labor action endures, the AAR could face complications in San Diego.

The Executive Director discussed her progress on her 90-Day Plan, as requested by the board: (III.5)

1. Initiate process for aligning staff with mission, values, and goals through the creation of a functional org chart
2. Address staff culture issues in order to move toward a professional, productive work environment
3. Complete a budget sweep; has already done operating expenses sweep.
4. Work with board to clarify vision for PUR and AAR 365
5. Clarify MOU with Emory—in process with counsel; Alice provided a white paper describing relationship between AAR/Emory. Alice explained the tiers of status/relationship with Emory.
6. Complete branding/public face work
7. Meet with Luce to explore possibilities around PUR and 365

The Executive Director gave an overview of current branding work. Acknowledging that while branding choices are management decisions, she desired Board input on the work to date. The AAR engaged marketing firm 31 Lengths to complete a brand review. Alice described their process and presented their findings. Their research included a review of the existing website, research documents, and other relevant materials including the 2016 communications audit, the IT audit, the membership survey, and comparable organizations. They also fielded a survey to staff members, officers, select members and stakeholders, receiving approximately 50 thorough responses.
Their analysis included their FIRE (Feedback, Insight, Ramifications, and Execution) analysis, raising several salient points:

Contextually there are negative factors affecting the AAR: declines in religion, humanities, departments, tenures positions, plus the increasing cost of education and general division in the country. Doing the same old, same old and expecting things to change would be a mistake. Now is the time to rethink and refocus the organization. With rotating executives, implementing change gets passed on and happens slowly. That said, everyone seems excited about the yet-to-be-expanded idea of “Public Understanding of Religion” and the long-range plan. PUR sounds great in theory, but there are a lot of questions: Is there a real need or desire for this? Is it true or compelling? Does the organization have the skill/POV/bandwidth to provide it? The truth is, the AAR has been a very internal-facing organization for 100 years. If the AAR wants to pursue public understanding of religion, it will have to start embracing, thinking, and living like an outward facing brand with a public persona. Currently, the primary perk of membership is the Annual Meeting. Having just one primary benefit is not ideal. “What if I can’t go to the meeting this year? Answer the question, “Why be a member?” Create a robust, expansive list of benefits. Embrace being in the service industry. Remember the old AmEx campaign: “Membership has its privileges.”

Members are faced with a lot of questions: Why is taking a religion course important? Why is a religion department necessary? Why get a degree in religion? Why become a teacher of religion? The questions all have the same answer. The organization must provide that answer.

Many people join as a means of career development. There are not as many careers to be had. The organization has to lead the way in creating opportunities both in and outside of academia. Be the champion for members.

Demographically the organization is older. No organization wants to be seen as aging or old school. Perception is reality. The AAR must appeal to a younger audience. Put a fresher face on everything. Say modern and relevant.

The primary benefit of the organization is connectivity. A network. Making connections and interacting with a like-minded community. Oddly, this is the exact same benefit promised by the internet and digital technology. Recognize this “frenemies” relationship. Use technology to support your mission, not to replace it. We need to think about how a brand that is about connectivity translates to the digital world.
There are inherent tensions and conflicts in the AAR. For example, in the perceived binaries of confessional vs. analytical; faith vs. rational; Christian vs. Other; focused vs. inclusive; serious vs. fun. These differences are inherent in any learned organization. Embrace the dichotomies. Transcend this friction. Can we turn a negative into a positive?

The organization is filled with 8000+ smart, opinionated, “problematizing” intellectuals who are quick to find fault, slights, and problems with much. We can address this in one of two ways: First, be careful not to say anything remotely opinionated so as not to offend. This will result mostly in blandness. Or, embrace the AAR’s role as a place for discourse, and have more of a distinct voice, recognizing that you may provoke. This is ultimately your choice, but we would recommend the latter. Be sure not to always come down on one side all the time.

The AAR has three audiences: members, potential members, and the general public.

Positioning: The AAR is the premier guild of professional scholars of religion. A learned society with the highest academic standards, the AAR is non-sectarian, non-partisan, and open to all. The AAR enables academics to gather, connect, and share their research. It also supports the careers and development of its 8000+ members. But more than anything, the AAR promotes the importance of teaching religion and the societal value of understanding religion.

Tonality should be:
- smart, inspiring
- inclusive, inviting
- advocating, empowering
- challenging, provocative
- fresh

Tonality should not be:
- overly Christian
- overtly religious or faith-based
- silly
- stuffy
- bland
The organization’s name, the American Academy of Religion, came under scrutiny. After careful analysis, 31 Lengths recommends retaining the name while placing more emphasis on the initials – AAR.

31 Lengths recommends a new logo and colors that would imbue the brand with energy and excitement. It would also help communicate some of the key attributes of the organization: connectivity, diversity, and relationships.

The new brand will be unveiled with the new website.

The Executive Director engaged the board around the questions: What do we mean by public understanding of religion? Is enhancing the public understanding of religion half of our work in the world? What are the implications for resources? for staff? for members? She offered several possibilities in answer to the question about what we mean by enhancing the public understanding of religion – possibilities she has gleaned from reading minutes and having conversations with constituents.

- The AAR should be the “go to” place for religion and society.
- The AAR should produce publicly accessible pieces for multiple publics.
- The AAR should influence public dialogue
- The AAR should take principled positions for advocacy.
- The AAR should enhance the development and distribution of religious literacy material and provide media/public engagement training for members.
- The AAR should provide media/engage-the-public training/support for members
- The AAR should advocate for the humanities in general and Religious Studies departments and Schools of Theology in particular.
- The AAR should partner with Pew and/or PRRI and seek out new alliances that support the public understanding of religion.

The Board recognized all the possibilities as desirable and encouraged leadership to prioritize, considering current structures, resources, and capacity. The Board noted a need for emphasizing institutions’ and members’ responsibility and obligations to participate in educating public(s). The Board prioritized media/public square training/preparation for members. The Board also encouraged the building of a database of members and areas of expertise. The Board encouraged leadership to do an inventory of what is already happening in other organizations with a view toward public understanding of religion. Ideas mentioned included: a speaker’s bureau (already noted in previous board minutes); leveraging the classroom as a form of the public sphere; work through departments and regions; deploy PUR as a practice when planning the annual meeting (e.g., have as a session a Wikipedia hack-a-thon to edit
religious studies content for clarity); set up public engagement events in local contexts; and training departments in advocacy work. The Board discussed the AAR role in being a broker of, or source for, religious literacy material as well as the international scope of AAR membership.  

**Finance Report:** (IV.1, IV.2, IV.3, IV.4, IV.5)

Treasurer Jonathan Sarna led a discussion of the 2018 budget proposal, discussing specifically some one-time 2018 expenses that would not appear in the 2019 budget. The board discussed the proposed deficit and anticipates a plan for a balanced budget. Director of Finance Deborah Minor offered details and answered questions. The Board recognized that new costs are emerging with programming (e.g. PUR, staff re-org). The Board concluded the conversation by thanking Deborah for her outstanding service to the AAR.  

**Motion 5:**

To approve the budget as presented.  
Unanimously approved.  

**Program Committee Report:**

Program Committee Director Kathryn McClymond used mission and values as a basis for discussing best practices. She reviewed the agenda for Friday’s meeting of the Program Committee: 1) Meeting Alice and getting to know her; 2) Planning for the annual meeting Program Unit Chairs’ breakfast. Kathryn will lead a discussion inviting chairs’ input into the development of best practices for steering committees. Specifically, the Program Committee is interested in establishing best practices regarding graduate student participation on steering committees, program unit chairs’ succession policies, and the development of by-laws. The PC is aware that there is huge variability across program units, and believes that establishing best practice guidelines would diminish problems that they are currently seeing. In addition, the PC will establish procedures for complaints about leadership that cannot be resolved at the unit level. 3. The issue of too many units and too little time to oversee them is a continuing theme of PC conversations. Should there be limits on presentation type and number? The PC is moving toward suggesting that individuals may only present their research once at each annual meeting, but this idea will be discussed with program unit chairs before any action is taken. 4. The PC reflected on inclusion in leadership and how to increase opportunities for diversity of many types. They hope to invite a conversation with status committees, and Kecia Ali will work with Kathryn to make this happen. They also considered the membership of the Program Committee itself. The Program Committee encourages the Board to consider including one member on the PC who is
employed outside the academy (but active in AAR) in order to gain input as the annual meeting program evolves to include more non-academic professionals. As the AAR moves from a “Nominations Committee” to a “Governance and Leadership Development Committee,” it should develop pathways through the PC and its units and to develop the notion that member is benefit in providing these opportunities. The Board questioned prior experience as necessary for membership and suggested we drop it as barrier for some members, but this has yet to be decided formally; it will continue to be discussed at the PC level. The Board also recommends representation on the PC that reflects a diversity of fields.

The Program Committee has put into place a process to handle annual meeting program issues that arise outside of typical Program Committee processes and practices. For now, should any programmatic issue arise, the Program Committee chair will poll the Program Committee and will then pass on the Program Committee’s recommendation to the Executive Director.

Bylaws: (VI.1, VI.2)

President Gushee brought to the Board recommended changes to the Bylaws. In addition to cosmetic changes, the primary change was to remove gender-binary language from the Bylaws. The Board asked if legal counsel had vetted the changes to the non-discrimination statement and authorized the Executive Director to check with counsel if that had not already been done.

Motion 6: To Approve the proposed change in AAR By-laws.
Unanimously approved.

Executive Director’s Report: Part II

The Executive Director reviewed the long-range plan microsite including the mission statement, the values statement, and the four strategic goals.

She engaged the Board around the 365-24/7 concept, asking for specific ideas. The Board discussed the possibility of a year-round AAR app with both inward and outward facing capabilities. Ideas included: an “Ask an expert” feature; help with promoting regions and solve some of the problems with our too busy website; membership promotion; reporting grievances; pop-up meetings; news aggregation; pedagogical inspiration; connection to blog sites.

A restructuring of staff functions is underway. The process includes: conversation with staff to let them know about the restructure that will seek two things: 1) functional positions and job descriptions and 2) alignment with mission, values, and
strategic goals, and that the restructure will likely have impact on current positions in three ways: 1) modification of some positions; 2) elimination of some positions; 3) creation of some new positions; 4) development of a functional org chart; 5) development of job descriptions for each functional position engagement with Emory HR to classify each position; 6) comparison of each new position with current staff positions and qualifications; 7) implementation of new organizational structure

With the restructuring currently underway, the Executive Director believes there will be four areas in the new structure: Finance and Administration; Marketing, Media, and Communications; Scholarly Engagement; and Public Engagement.

Upon beginning her work as Executive Director, Alice reviewed board minutes from 2005 until now. Several items appeared as repeated concerns / issues:

Consistent low-level intensity worries about global connections that never rise to a higher priority. Issues raised (most persistently by SWP) about need for more and better data, to understand landscape of our field, and to interpret what we already possess. Revisions to statements on academic freedom. Concerns over resources related to committees, particularly related to staff time. The AAR has mechanisms for creating new committees but we do not evaluate them and do not have a process for closing out committee work given new circumstances. Regions persist with issues of governance and finance and their complicated relationship with the larger body. Regions are also recognized as foundational to AAR work. Technology issues persist with recognized needs for infrastructure, demanding significant resources. Board nominating committee has had continual struggles and needs clarity and transparency. There has been a consistent need for long term planning. Issues arise around effective investments and responsible planning. There has been a proliferation of program units Governance issues. Questions around public statements. Staffing org chart and job descriptions inadequate. F2f summit for historically underrepresented groups.

The Executive Director discussed her 365-day plan:

- Org chart restructured and from that update the tactical plan (LPR)
- Hire director of finance and administration
- Strategic plans for each area identified
- Review of working groups/committees and develop a plan for how to move forward and develop processes
- Work on governance and leadership development process and provide pathways to engagement
- Complete professional conduct task force work
• Regions task force
• Attend to investments—build a committee and external members—to advise and plan
• Attend to data, research, and the departmental directory
• Improve onboarding of new employees
• Staff development
• Board development
• Have plan developed to get money from foundations for value added and raise dollars from donors to support specific needs—e.g. Scholarships to contingent faculty to attend the annual meeting, etc. We may need more award and prizes but this also requires more staff resources. Awards and prizes can be pathway to involvement.

The Executive Director also discussed long-range goals:

• Balance budget
• Lead on issues facing higher education in ways that will help members and institutions
• Centralize status committee work—i.e. work towards their eventual obsolescence.

Sunday, 16 September 2018
8:30 a.m.

Publications Task Force: (VIII.1, VIII.2, VIII.3, VIII.4, VIII.5, VIII.6, VIII.7, VIII. 8)

President Gushee praised the work of the committee. Publications Task Force chair, Ted Vial, introduced the topic and led the Board through a presentation of the committee’s work. The Board discussed the Digital Humanities document and recommended three minor changes.

Motion 7: To adopt the AAR Guidelines for Assessing Digital Scholarship document as presented (with three minor changes) by the Publications Task Force. Unanimously approved.

The Board discussed several aspects of the task force report with forthcoming ideas including digital scholarship as topic at the Annual Meeting; reviews of digital scholarship in AAR publications; establishment of mentorship/training in digital methods; releasing the statement as an article in JAAR; offering grants for digital
scholarship; establish committee to support digital scholarship; recognizing exemplary
digital work with prize/award; and considering a new “book” series in digital
scholarship.

The Board discussed the task force’s proposed Tenure and Promotion in relation to
Publications Guidelines. The task force will make revisions based on the Board
discussion and will present the final statement for Board approval at the November
meeting with the intention of making it public soon thereafter.

The discussion continued on the task force report focusing on publications and how
they are related to the ways we foster cutting edge scholarship. Staff member Sarah
Levine discussed the member survey, noting the small sample size. Recommendations
include: replacing RSN with a blog which would include the same content as current
RSN but function more sustainably and be easily connected to media outlets, making
RSN more a part of the whole; and possibly create a print item as an additional method
for communication but not necessarily on a regular basis.

Reading Religion now has editorial board but its scope extends beyond its reach. The
task force makes a few suggestions: Strengthen “Spotlight on teaching and theological
education,” to reach more members and because interest in pedagogy is waning;
consider future options for the teaching book series; consider podcasting which many
think is a great idea while recognizing it is costly and time consuming; solicit podcasts
and publish in them in a critical way that involves review and is supported by grant
money.

The conversation continued by considering all AAR publishing programs and the
purview and composition of the Publications Committee. The Board hopes to expand
membership of the committee.

Other Business

David described the Board meeting in November as brief but important. He encouraged
Board members to attend the unpopular business meeting Sunday morning.

Adjourned at 10:30.

Respectfully submitted,

Kimberly Rae Connor,
Secretary