Minutes  
American Academy of Religion  
Board of Directors Meeting  
Sept 16 – 18, 2016


I. Call to Order  
President Serene Jones called the meeting to order at 9 a.m and thanked all staff for their hard work in preparation for the meeting.

II. Approval of Minutes

Motion 1: to approve the minutes of The May 12, 2016 Conference Call BoD Meeting  
Passed unanimously

III. President’s Report  
Pres. Jones related she has been finalizing plenary sessions on the theme of Revolutionary Love, and there was discussion of securing sufficient space and time to encompass whatever conversations may need to happen after the November election.

IV. Executive Director’s Report  
Jack Fitzmier presented his report in abbreviated fashion with the help of a circulated document.

A) AAR Transitions: the AAR says goodbye to Aislinn Jones after many capable years of versatile service. There was discussion of the need for thoughtful transition planning in light of a search for the next Executive Director in the next year, an anticipated overlap period between Jack Fitzmier and the new director, and likely transitions among senior staff.

B) The Membership Profile is now live and already helping us know just who are our members.

C) A Technology Assessment by an external firm as part of the strategic planning process has been shared in draft to staff and a revised version will soon be shared with the board.

D) A Communications Assessment will be undertaken in the next several weeks by a public relations firm.

E) Letters of Concern: Several letters of concern addressed to the Executive Director were discussed that fall short of specific requests for public statements or formal actions by the AAR.

F) Update on Luce Fellows: There are three current fellows and hope for total of 8 under current grant, with hope to get more funding.
G) Reading Religion: This summer’s launch of Reading Religion, the AAR’s more responsive effort to coordinate shorter reviews of new scholarship came to strong early reviews. Although there is a considerable amount of technology time and expense, this model of content delivery may be useful in other contexts.

V. Treasurer’s Report
CFO Deborah Minor presented financial reports that were heavily annotated to enable comprehension of them. With the audit complete, the numbers for FY 2016 are very solid.

A) Revenue/Expense
On the revenue side, AAR should finish 2016 about where we expected to be. Most of the gap between 2015 revenue and 2016 revenue is accounted for by the 2015 Luce Fellows Grant, which must be recorded in the year received. There were some decreases in our membership, but it seems that the current year confirms that membership decline since 2008 has stabilized at around 8500. It was noted that loss of student membership accounts for much of this decline. This year’s advertising and exhibit space for the Annual Meeting is down but not more dramatically than last year, and registration is looking a little better than last year in August. On the expense side, software-related staffing is capitalized, and this improves the operating expense picture; in future if staff are not working on software, this will have an impact on the bottom line. It was noted that costs of strategic planning are included in the budget and though costs for the search firm imagined for the E.D. are not, it is expected and there are identified additional resources for that consultancy.

B) Assets and Liabilities
The BoD acknowledge receipt of a very positive balance sheet. AAR debt has been erased. We have cash of nearly one million, though that is mostly restricted, and more than 7.5 million in stocks, much of which is unrestricted. There are no expectations of using endowment money to cover operating shortfalls. And there are resources that can be called upon to support new initiatives related to the strategic plan.

VI. Program Director’s Report

A) Policy Statement on Related Scholarly Organizations
Greg Johnson presented for BoD approval a Policy Statement on Related Scholarly Organizations, circulated in advance. The Statement is the product of a BoD-created subcommittee staffed by Robert Puckett that fleshed it out, and a subsequent review by the Program Committee, which produced the proposed draft. An approved Policy Statement would guide the Program Committee in its future recommendations concerning renewals and applications by related RSOs.

Motion 2: to accept the AAR Policy Statement on Related Scholarly Organization as submitted by the Program Committee as amended in the following two ways: i) include the AAR mission statement; ii) strike “for affiliation” and add “wanting to affiliate” in bullet point beginning “short description of the organization reasons …”
Passed Unanimously
B) Program Committee Nomenclature Change
As the Program Committee has had to exercise a higher level of review because of scarce annual meeting space, there has been some reconsideration of nomenclature, especially the distinction between “section” and “group,” that is no longer meaningful in terms of the actual allocation of annual meeting space/time and for some time has been losing meaning in terms of the organization of the field. The Program Committee voted unanimously and now there is only one classification of program units, “Program Units,” beyond the exploratory “Seminars.” The BoD agreed that such operational decisions are within the purview of the Program Committee, which is in any case an elected committee.

Motion 3: the BoD extends its support for the Program Committee’s operational decisions to change the nomenclature for program units in alignment with current Program Unit policies.
Passed unanimously

VII. Discussion of the Long Range Plan
Terri Theisen of Theisen Consulting, the firm that has served since November 2015 as the strategic planning consultant, gave an overview of the process, key findings of focus groups, interviews, and surveys, and presented a Draft Strategic Plan, which was circulated before the meeting, for extensive discussion. The goal for the day was for the Board of Directors to discuss and flesh out the Mission, Values, Goals, and Key Strategies so as to guide staff as they elaborate on the tactical action items for consideration at the BoD November 2017 meeting, with a aim to approve a final Strategic Plan as soon after the Annual Meeting as possible. These minutes are organized in terms of Ms. Theisen’s presentation.

A) Why is AAR Developing a Plan at this Time?
The Draft Strategic Plan, which had been developed in a series of conversations with the Executive Committee, and informed by the entire staff, included draft language about Mission, Values, Goals, and Overarching Strategies, but did not include the fuller draft including actions, metrics, and timetables on which the staff has been working.

B) What Have We Learned So Far?
1) Information Gathering Steps
   Focus Groups
   Staff Feedback
   Comparable Organizations
   Member Surveys (F ’15: one on current members and one on lapsed members)
   Stakeholder Interviews (25 people identified as key stakeholders for 30-90 minute interviews)

2) Emerging Themes
   • Vision and Values
     Purpose before Task
     Clarify the Long Term vision of the AAR
     Reaffirm Organizational Values
     Gain Clarity about who we are
• Advocate for Humanities Field
  Define/Illustrate meaning of our field
  Support academic leaders in building their case
  Papers, talking points, dialogue
  Attracting students to the major of religious studies
  International reach and scope

• Connect to the Larger Community/the Public
  Become GO TO place for religion and society
  Social media activity – blogs, podcasts, Twitter Facebook, YouTube
  TED-talk like opportunities to give public “tastes” of AAR content
  “Everything doesn’t always have to be so heavy”
  Influence Public Dialogue
    Traditional Media
    Responsible reporting on religion
  Take Positions: real principled advocacy
  Engage with publications through articles, blogs, guest editorials, conf summaries

• ReDefine Operating Assumptions
  Embrace all types of members and refine structure and services accordingly
  Contingent Faculty and students and independent scholars: Explore “associate membership”
  Make annual/regional meetings more accessible
  Intentional networking, discussion forums, collaborative dialogue
  Conversation spaces: more facilitation, less presenting
  Love Annual Meeting but want MORE than that.

• Assess Current State
  Stable staff leadership
  Clarity about decision making structures
  Nomination transparency; intentional diversity in leadership
  Maintain/enhance specialized units
  Maintain/enhance membership resources, like syllabus database
  Step up communication through technology and web based means

• Support non-traditional Careers for Members
  Help non-traditional members find new career pathways
    Active outreach to industries/leaders who can impact hiring decisions
  Make case for use of Religious Studies advanced degrees in other areas
  Gear a set of member services to this non-traditional group

3) Results of Analysis of Comparable Institutions: What are Peers Doing?
• Comparable Organizations Explored: AAA, AHA, APA, APSA, ASA, SBL
• Membership figures of all are largely quite stable
• Revenue: most between $3m and $5m in revenue
• Some have both Individual and Institutional members and sponsors
• Employment: nothing too interesting beyond “career centers”
• On Line Presence: Some (AHA &AAA) have webinars and some meeting content posted
• Diversity/Inclusion/Equity: 3/7 have diversity and inclusion programs and devoted staff

4) Technology and Communications Audits Underway

C) Deep Dive on Mission
The BoD did a series of “deep dive” exercises on the draft language of Mission, Values, and Goals/Key Strategies, breaking into different configurations of small groups and discussion together.

Guiding Questions
• Does the proposed mission statement describe what we do and why we do it?
• Does the proposed mission statement provide direction for the board, committees and units, and staff?
• Does the mission statement help to distinguish AAR from other organizations?

D) Deep Dive into Values
The BoD participated in small group and large group discussion of the draft plan’s values. A synthesis of the discussion was later assembled and will be distributed to the BoD electronically for comment and ranking.

Guiding Questions
• Do the core values represent principles that guide AAR’s actions?
• Do the core values represent how we actually treat people?
• Are we willing to make decisions about who we recruit and promote into volunteer leadership based on these values?
• Are we willing to make decisions about who we hire/retain for our professional staff based on these values?
• Do the core values represent how we do what we do? Would we continue to uphold these values if they put us at a competitive disadvantage?

E) Deep Dive into Goals and Key Strategies
A synthesis of the discussion was later assembled and will be distributed to the BoD electronically for comment and ranking. We then turned to discuss the Goals and Key Strategies that would drive the tactics. The following questions guided discussions:

Guiding Questions
• Is our membership front and center?
• Are we holding ourselves to the right performance variables?
• Is there enough innovation in our goals/strategies to assure that we remain relevant?
• Have we generated enough creative tension?
• Are we uncomfortable enough to keep challenging ourselves?
• Does this plan give us a platform to drive internal collaboration?

F) Closing Reflections:
The BoD discussed what resonated with or surprised us about the planning discussion.

VIII Consideration of Recommendations
A) Academic Relations Committee/Committee on Academic Freedom

The BoD had a lengthy discussion of a proposal from the Academic Relations Committee “Concerning the Establishment of Permanent Committee on Academic Freedom.” The BoD takes seriously the vexing and urgent nature of the issue, particularly for our colleagues in Islamic Studies, and the recent experience of the Salaita case, which the BoD engaged in real time alongside its considerable effort to elaborate a policy on public statements. Discussion ensued on whether the issue as presented here warranted a standing committee to address these concerns, in light of the BoD’s current policy and procedures on public statement, or whether those policies are insufficiently robust? It was noted that the resolution as received did not acknowledge that the BoD has not only formed an “ad hoc committee” as asserted, but drafted the policy, discussed at the BoD, aired before the membership in an open meeting invited on the website and by mail. The case of Professor Hawkins at Wheaton College was cited as an example, and it was noted that Hawkins is a Political Scientist and not a member of the AAR. It was also noted that, as in that case, there can be strategic reasons in the furtherance of the particular case that the AAR might not be advised to make a public statement or intervention. This was true in the Hawkins case, and informed BoD decision making along the way. To date, the BoD has not received a straight on academic freedom case to test the sufficiency of our recently elaborated policy and procedures, a policy and procedure that we reiterate has been offered in the spirit of a living document that needs to be revisited in light of such eventualities.

Sunday, September 18

IX  New Business: Transition and Search Planning

Staff were excused so the BoD could speak to matters of Transition and Search Planning, and Pres. Jones reported on the E.C.’s breakfast discussion on transition matters with Terri Theisen, first with Senior Staff and then without staff. There was continued discussion of the implications of the likely retirements/transition of other senior staff for the shape and timing of the Executive Director search process for the new Executive Director. The E.C. continued discussion of the transition process after Ms. Theisen was excused and a consensus emerged that a search for the E.D. should be encompassed in a larger transition plan. The E.C. crafted a preliminary transition timetable and plan, resolving to firm up its planned recommendations for BoD consideration and approval at its November meeting.

President Jones then offered the BoD’s recommendation that Theisen Consulting be retained for the search process, noting the firm’s intricate knowledge of the organization from the strategic plan and noting the professional and independent judgment Theisen exhibited.

Motion 4: to Retain Terri Theisen to consult with the BoD on the transition planning and with the search process for the Executive Director.

Passed Unanimously

X.  Consideration of Recommendations from the Contingent Faculty Task Force
The BoD turned to a document from the Contingent Faculty Task Force requesting action on two resolutions related to some manner of continuing their work and ensuring the concerns of Contingent Faculty are integrated even more fully into the work of the AAR.

**Motion 5:** to accept the following two recommendations of the Contingent Faculty Task Force and to ask the staff to formulate specific proposals for the Working Group’s constitution and the arrangement of the Board Member by electronic ballot to the BoD in advance of the November meeting, and including membership representation from at least one of the Status of Committees.
1) The Contingent Faculty Task Force become a working group within the AAR
2) To create a permanent position on the BoD, which will be filled by a member with contingent faculty status.
Passed Unanimously

**XI. Finalization of the Board Handbook**

A new Board Handbook was circulated in advance for comment and approval. BoD members found it very helpful, especially in orientation to our work. Kathleen McMahan and Elizabeth Hardcastle and other Staff are to be thanked for their hard work

**Motion 6:** to adopt the new version of the Board Handbook circulated and to thank staff Kathleen McMahan and Elizabeth Hardcastle for their hard work in refining it.
Passed Unanimously

**XII. Formation of Three Critical Groups**

Documents were circulated in advance with interested or brainstormed names for the peopling of a Contingent Faculty Working Group, a proposed Professional Conduct Task Force, and a proposed Publications Task Force.

1) **Contingent Faculty Working Group**
   Names from a variety of perspectives were suggested for nomination

2) **Professional Conduct Task Force**
   A proposal contemplated at the February BoD/Status of Summit was drafted by Kecia Ali and Jack Fitzmier was circulated in advance, proposing a Professional Conduct Task Force to be charged with crafting an *AAR Professional Conduct Statement* (to be recommended to the Board for its consideration) that will address the following issues:
   
   a. Stress our twofold commitment – to robust support of academic freedom and to the expectation that all AAR members will conduct themselves in a professional manner.
   
   b. Clearly state AAR’s desires to build communities that are free from discrimination and harassment, and that foster inclusivity, mutual respect, and diversity. These terms / concepts will be spelled out in the statement.
   
   c. Update and revise our current statement on Sexual Harassment.
d. Make clear how the above relate to AAR gatherings and activities (national, regional, and other).

e. Recommend policies for handling infractions of professional conduct.

The BoD also discussed a number of potential Task Force members, some identified in the document and some added to the list.

Motion 7: to form an AAR Professional Conduct Task Force and to receive by electronic ballot before November a draft charge and suggested members for further action. Passed Unanimously

3) Publications Task Force
Building on a series of BoD discussions in previous meetings, Jack Fitzmier spoke to the timeliness for creation of a Publications Task Force to take stock of sea changes in academic publishing and to suggest how AAR publications could be configured accordingly.

Motion 8: to form an AAR Publications Task Force to explore challenges and possibilities of the changing publishing landscape for AAR members and for AAR programs (this carefully aligns with the strategic plan). Staff will bring a draft charge and suggested members to come before the board by electronic ballot in advance of the November 2016 meeting. Passed Unanimously

XIII. Meeting Adjourned 10:30

Respectfully Submitted,

Michael D. McNally
Secretary