

American Academy of Religion – Southwest Region  
Pre-Conference Workshop  
Friday, March 11, 2016  
11:00a-6:30p  
Marriott DFW Airport Hotel  
Irving, TX

**How Might the Region  
Become a Stronger and More Meaningful Presence  
in the Scholarly and Professional Lives of its Members?**

**A Workshop to Re-Imagine Our Time Together During and Between Annual Meetings**

Workshop Plan

Preparation:

Twenty members of the AAR-SW who have responded to the invitation to participate and who together represent the diversity of our membership as much as possible, particularly with respect to discipline, gender, race/ethnicity, and age, prepare for the workshop by reading pre-workshop materials distributed in advance and by writing initial responses to structured questions. They will arrive at the meeting hotel site (Marriott DFW North) a day prior to SWCRS in time for a working lunch on Friday, March 11, 2016 which will begin the workshop.

- Workshop Participants List attached
- Preparation document emailed to participants for pre-workshop reading
- Questions in preparation document for participants' or pre-workshop reflection

Workshop Schedule of Activities:

10:00a Marriott arrival

11:00-12:30 Luncheon & Workshop Welcome and Opening

- Introduction of Workshop Purpose, Facilitators, Major Questions, Structure (11:00)
- Table Discussion (11:15):
  - Why do you come to this meeting (each year, if you do; this year, if this is new)?
  - What do you value about the meeting?
  - What do you expect from the meeting? What is always really good for you?
- Organization (12:00):
  - 3 Work Groups:
    - AAR-SW Annual Meeting (Jack)
    - Collaboration and Work Between Annual Meetings (Kathy)
    - Diversifying Our Scholarly Community (BJ)
  - Locations, Facilitators
  - Tasks:
    - General discussion guided by questions
    - What-if brainstorming

- Presenting of major discussion themes, insights, and list of what-ifs

12:30-1:45 Session A: Working Group Discussions – Questions

1:45-2:00 Brief Break

2:00-3:30 Session B: Working Group Brainstorming – Wishful thinking, What if?

3:30-4:00 Refreshment Break (hotel and SWCRS check-in)

4:00-5:30 Session C: Working Group Presentations – Themes and Ideas

5:30-5:45 Brief Break

5:45-6:15 Workshop Closing – Discussion of the Themes and Ideas

6:15-6:30 Workshop Reflection

7:00-10:00 Leadership Dinner: Workshop Debriefing and Action Planning

## Working Groups Discussion Questions

### AAR-SW Annual Meeting

Premise: While the Southwest Region of the AAR has realized advances in recent years in the creativity and quality of the scholarly presentations at its annual meeting at SWCRS and innovated some of its programming, annual meeting attendance has steadily declined despite both encouragement from Atlanta that AAR members attend their regional meetings and increased communication about the meeting within the Region. While this is not necessarily a reflection on either the quality of the Region's scholarly presentations or program leadership, it is perhaps a sign that what has served us well in the past is in need of re-thinking. Because we are committed to the continued viability, not only of our region but of all the regions of the AAR, we want proactively and honestly to assess how we conduct our business at the regional level and how our meetings might be enhanced, invigorated, and made more relevant to the particular concerns of members.

#### Questions:

- What do we hold to be the most important priorities of our organization and of our annual meeting?
- What sorts of session might we include that we haven't in order to support our priorities?
- What assumptions might we embrace that were once true about our organization and/or our annual meeting that might no longer be relevant?
- How might we break from those assumptions without disconnecting ourselves from our rich history?
- What about our format or organization fosters or stifles our conversations or interactions?
- What might we be free to do if we weren't reading papers?
- How might the contours of academic disciplines, especially as featured in AAR-SW annual meeting sessions, be re-envisioned to enhance interdisciplinarity, the integration of theory and practice and creative pedagogy?
- My last line of thinking had to do with land grant colleges. I am struck by what it was that brought land-grant colleges into existence, namely, the need to fill a gap that other institutions or sectors of society weren't filling. Land-grant colleges meant to fill a liberal and practical need of the larger population. This idea intrigues me today, in part, because our disciplines sit in the midst of the gap that continues to grow around us. We so often teach in settings that ask us to justify our existence under the assumption that college is about job training. We find ourselves on the defensive. I would love to help us go on the offensive, to frame the questions that get asked of us in such a way that we describe the gap we fill rather than the job we can help someone secure. Where else in society can one entertain the questions and priorities that drive us? Where else in society is one given time to consider such things? I would say not many places. I have been thinking that part of what we ought to do is find a way to name the things we do in a conference setting that could not happen almost anywhere else in society, if we could not describe our weekends as a kind of filling the gap. I suspect we are closest to doing this already than maybe the other two things, but it might be good to stop and consider what it is and how it (whatever that is) runs against the

other things we have to do. In essence, I am wondering if we might not do well to remember the one thing we want to do in our meetings to make sure we do it well.

### Collaboration, and Work Between Annual Meetings

Despite the proliferation of social media, blogs and other online professional networks, it is our experience that scholars in the Region do not know each other as well as they might and are often unaware of the expertise and experiences of colleagues working at institutions in their own vicinities—whether in the same city, county or state—, especially those who do not regularly attend AAR-SW annual meetings. We think that regions are ideally situated to address this concern. For example, AAR-SW members who do regularly attend annual meetings report that they would benefit from working with each other *between* annual meetings by gathering on each other's campuses, sharing resources and opportunities and, in general, exchanging experiences. Such collaboration could become contexts for encountering new colleagues and even, occasionally, joining in new research undertakings.

- What are some things we could do beyond our annual meeting to support our priorities?
- I really wanted to give participants permission to do things differently. I have been trying to think about how to make this point. One thought I had was to talk about flipped classrooms. Have any of you been touched by the craze? The idea is that what used to take place in the classroom gets moved to an online setting so that something else can happen in the classroom. I was interested in learning what a flipped conference setting might look like. What might sessions that normally take place over the weekend look like on each others campuses throughout the year? How would the students that make up our audiences respond to what we do? Most of all, what might we be free to do if we weren't reading papers? How would that support the sessions after the conference. All of this might foolhardy, but I thought it might make for some interesting conversations, and it might help us see what we are doing or might be doing a little differently.
- How might the AAR-SW facilitate collaboration among its members on multi-authored research projects and creative activities?
- How might the region build bridges between scholarly discourses in the broader academy and topics and themes specific to regions, thereby increasing the local relevance of scholarly meetings and publications?
- How might members of the Region imagine and concretize a “place” where colleagues can share struggles and successes, hopes and visions, ideas and opportunities, between meetings?

### Diversifying our Scholarly Community

The racial, ethnic, social class, and age demographics of higher and secondary education are rapidly changing in North America. For instance, given the steady decline of tenured professors as a percentage of all of the instructors at institutions of higher education in the U.S., there is a growing “generation gap” in our profession, an issue raised prominently at the SWCRS 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary “fireside chat.” Hence, there is a need to re-think the nature of inter-generational engagement. Senior scholars can be given space and time to mentor younger scholars regarding job opportunities, interviewing skills and publication pitfalls to avoid. Junior scholars can be empowered to introduce their senior colleagues to new teaching strategies and ways to

incorporate new technologies in the classroom. We believe that the Region is ideally situated to address this concern. The workshop, which will bring younger and older scholars together for a full day of discussion, itself constitutes a beginning to foster an intergenerational community of scholars.

- How might intergenerational scholarly communities be fostered? How might older scholars learn from younger scholars about pedagogical innovations that resonate with the needs and skills of the next generation? How might older scholars assist younger scholars in their career trajectories?
- I also wanted to try to think about some ways to make it easier for the graduate students and junior faculty that participate in our sessions to change our directions rather than try to become "us." To be honest, this thought actually started a couple of years ago when BJ lamented there not being more senior faculty in the ALR sessions one year. That comment troubled me for some reason if only because it revealed how he and those he had with him (quite a few that year) were wanting to use the weekend, namely, as a way to learn how to do the things senior faculty do at these meetings. I don't want to discount that desire. It came from a great place. But I remember thinking how much more we could benefit from a new generation challenging us to bring the ways they learn and communicate and everything else to us. In other words, I wondered if there might not be good reason to let those in training train us. This is a different sort of flipping, isn't it? Instead of us teaching them more, they begin to teach us. I don't know how to get to what I am thinking here, but I do sense there is something to get at. I suspect a good dose of ecclesiastical thinking might reveal something, but I haven't dug into that in some time. Getting to something I have heard Jack say, though, conferences can be a kind of cross-generational congregation if we let it. I think I am thinking in this direction, but not sure where it takes us.
- How might we communicate our organization's (new) priorities to our next generation of scholars?