

## ASR EXECUTIVE OFFICER'S REPORT – 2011/12

Strictly speaking, ASR operates on a calendar year, yet the reality of a mid-year meeting is that in many respects our real operations work on a year that ends and begins at each annual meeting. Fiscally 2011 ended well, although again we were still faced with significant room-take penalties as a result of poor attendance at the Las Vegas meeting. The advantage of the Las Vegas situation to us financially was that because the room rates were so low, the actual dollars we had to pay out in penalties were about half what they were in 2010. Here, however, the rate is much higher, and we may face quite substantial penalties. One possible solution to this for the future is to have two different preregistration rates, by combining advance reservations made in our hotel through us with our normal preregistration rates, while charging a significantly higher registration rate to those who do not stay in our hotel. But there's no question that this would be a lot of work for the Executive Office, and of course, it would make those seeking a cheaper hotel angry. For example, if next year's rate were to be \$179 + taxes, then we could "sell" a package of preregistration and room for \$250. This would be non-refundable. We could then set registration alone at something like \$125. (Of course, with discounts for students in both cases.) In any case, this is something I want to let you know early on.

There is also, however, good news in that we are continuing to see outstanding results from our partnership w/ OUP in the production of *Sociology of Religion*. As I am writing this, we have over \$100k in our checking account, and I was able to put \$25k into our savings accounts (funds) at the start of 2012 (i.e., "surplus" from 2011). The only reason I am holding the \$100k right now is because of my concern about penalties at this meeting. Once I resolve the penalties issue, I will consider putting additional moneys into savings. Given that there are transaction costs, however, it makes no sense to move funds quickly back-and-forth between checking and funds—and we do get interest on our checking account; so the money is not literally sitting there doing nothing on our behalf at any point.

We did implement changes in the Program this year to try to achieve economies. We now have only two days of sessions and have added night sessions to Day 1. What is not clear is how much these economies will help us this year, inasmuch as we already had our room contract in place. The hotel did shift the days for us, but not the room block size. We do not as I write this have a New York City property for next year, though between this writing and this meeting Jim will have made a trip to Manhattan to look at several properties. We can obviously cut back our room block size there because we have no room block contracted at this point. Thus we can use this year's figures as a basis when we negotiate there. Another concern that the Program Committee might consider is that many of our sessions draw hardly anyone into them other than the authors of the papers. This causes us to have to arrange for more session rooms than it seems the traffic will really bear. It's sort of a Catch 22: We need these people to come to get more sleeping rooms occupied, but they don't really draw others into the meeting. Especially when these people choose booth to be on our program and not to stay in our hotel they are not doing the organization a lot of good. How to administer this without seeming to be saying there is "right" and "wrong" sociology of religion is a challenge, but having a session where four people give papers

to themselves and a chair is a poor use of resources. In some respects the evening sessions this year reflect an attempt to resolve this have-and-eat-too dilemma.

Fortunately, in the broader sense we remain strong financially, and thus far we have not had to dip into our investment principal (nor change our investment principles) at all to deal with meeting expenses. In fact, we're rather flush. In this respect, one might want to say "Thank God for OUP." We made a right decision there at the right time. (Attached you will find a financial statement for ASR for both last year and the first half of this year, plus a summary of our investments).

I still, however, think we need to consider a dues increase. As things stand now, we turn over all our dues to OUP. The result of that is that all our member services (dues mailings, ballot mailings, processing grant materials) are in effect "out-of-pocket" expenditures of ASR. Raising our dues to \$40 and \$20 respectively for regular and student members, while what could be called "only" a \$5 difference, would give us about what it costs for these mailings, so that in effect members' dues would pay for their direct member benefits in terms of their *SoR* subscription and membership notices (i.e.,  $600 \times 5 = \$3,000$ ). Every member who attends the annual meeting, of course, gets an enormous financial return on his or her dues investment, as the registration fee hardly covers the per capita cost of the meeting (which is over \$260/ attendee).

I also think we should consider the Gallagher (foreign) Travel grants. For the past two years, we have had a disappointing show-up ratio from those to whom we offered grants (though better this year than last). My observation on this is that \$500 is not enough to give significant travel help to people coming from abroad. The original idea, admittedly, was *not* to underwrite people's travel to North America, but rather to provide "on the ground expenses." That is, if people could get themselves here, then we would "take care of" their on-site expenses—a kind of free room and board. As hotel expenses go up, however, \$500 will not cover these expenses. Fred and I have discussed raising the amount to \$750/applicant. This would allow approximately \$200/n for room and taxes plus \$50/day for food. This amount is certainly not indulgent, but enough to make the trip more equal to the cost of a similar venture within their own continents. An alternative would be to offer four \$1k grants. In this approach we would be giving the free r & b plus half the ticket price. They would still have to come up with the other half, so it would not be a total freeloader—and would more closely approximate what a North American colleague would pay. We moved toward the latter last year, but did not actually implement it this year.

Our membership also remains strong. Last year at this time we had 652 members, the year before 665, and before that 669; this year 639. That's only a 3.9% loss across the two years—though the difference between the 2011 and 2012 rate is much larger than that between 2009 and 2010, which was less than one percent. Still, I consider the loss negligible against the whole. One thing we need to realize simply as a secular demographic trend is that a lot of the older Catholic crowd who remained very faithful as members, whether or not they attended our meetings after the "secularization" of the organization, are now being called up yonder, and there is not a corresponding value-commitment sector to take their place. New members who come to ASR are much less likely to be value rational and much more likely to be purpose rational. At the same time, I am from time to time taken aback by the number of younger scholars who still do not

know that ASR is the *not* the ASA Religion Section. I wish we could figure out how to make the difference between the two more prominent without ourselves seeming to be “sectarian.”

I think everyone knows that this year will conclude my term as Executive Officer, and Jim Cavendish will succeed me. We have already been working together, and Jim has been out this past weekend scouting NYC properties, about which we may or may not have a proposal by this meeting. The turnover will be a gradual one, as it was when I assumed office 16 years ago. I will continue to receive and disburse funds through the end of 2012. Jim will begin with the start of 2013. I will also at that point send Jim about 90% of our checkbook cash, and we will get his name and signature onto the investment accounts (which are all with one firm). The 10% of the cash I will hold will be for 2012 bills that are not received until 2013, in order to keep our records on an annual cash basis. (In other words, those checks will bear a 2012 date when the payment is submitted.) I don't expect a lot of money to be involved in this, but there are always a couple of items that carry over from one year to the next. I will then prepare the 2012 tax filing (which requires no money) in the spring as my “last act,” as it were, as Executive Officer. This was the process that was followed when I became Executive Officer, and I see no reason to change from it. Any checks that come to me with a 2013 date I will simply forward to Jim.

Jim can detail at the second Council meeting his plans as far as bringing more on-line capabilities as far as dues payments and meeting registrations are concerned.

Bill Swatos  
Executive Officer  
9 August 2012