

Large majority of AAR scholars prefer meeting with SBL: Unexpected level of support for joint meeting

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In the first internal survey of members of the American Academy of Religion, a poll has shown that between 70 and 75 percent, depending on the question, think it is important to hold its annual meeting concurrently with that of the Society of Biblical Literature.

When asked how important it is to have meetings in the same city on the same days, 59.4 percent said it is very important and 16 percent said it is somewhat important. Though the response rate was only 18 percent, the respondents were predominantly active members.

The AAR leadership decided a few years ago that it would end the practice of coordinating the two groups' meetings in 2008. Next year the AAR will meet in Chicago and the SBL in Boston.

The large majority who said they preferred meeting together would seem to confirm the discontent of those who protested the change—not only religion department professors but also book publishers and job-seekers.

Some officials of the AAR, whose ranks include those who teach about many different religions, had felt uncomfortable meeting in conjunction with the university and seminary teachers of the Hebrew and Christian Bible, according to numerous sources.

The growing size of the joint meetings, some say, demonstrates the popularity of the gatherings. The 2006 meetings in Washington, D.C., had a record registration over 11,000. About 10,200 registrants came to the 2007 meeting in San Diego, which was a high number for AAR-SBL meetings held in the western half of the U.S.

The survey was not designed as a “referendum” on the decision, said Jack Fitzmier, who became AAR executive director 18 months ago. “But the decision had been made without input from members.”

Some AAR board members were surprised at the high percentage of members who felt joint meetings are important, Fitzmier said. “But larger questions about the independent identity of AAR remain, and some board members thought that AAR ought to give separate meetings a try,” he said in an interview.

The AAR board will take up the issue again in April.