

Religion scholars agree to resume joint meetings: American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature

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The largest academic organizations focusing on religion and biblical studies have formally mended a seven-year rift and will resume next year their concurrent annual meetings that in the past brought about 10,000 professors and graduate students together the weekend before Thanksgiving.

The American Academy of Religion's leadership decided unilaterally in 2003 for the AAR to meet separately from the Society of Biblical Literature, contending in part that the meetings had grown so large that the AAR was limited in program expansion.

Religion book publishers, university job recruiters and many members protested that meeting separately in different cities—which took effect after 2007 because of hotel bookings made far in advance—was impractical and unwanted by most.

An AAR survey of members confirmed that the decision was unpopular. When Jack Fitzmier, an American religious history professor at the Claremont School of Theology, was named the new AAR executive director in 2005, he said he hoped to repair the academic division.

AAR and SBL, which have headquarters in the same building in Atlanta near Emory University, jointly announced to their members June 28 that the cooperative pattern would resume in San Francisco next year, Chicago in 2012, Baltimore in 2013, then continue at least through 2019.

Kent Richards, the longtime SBL executive director who retires this summer, had said that biblical scholars were against the split from the start. "We believe that

concurrent meetings will serve the interests of our members, will help to advance the many disciplines and areas of study we represent, and will maintain and advance the critical inquiry that characterizes the work of our societies,” wrote Fitzmier and Richards in a joint letter. “We invite you to join us in building this exciting new future.”

By coincidence, both organizations will hold their annual meeting in Atlanta this fall but weeks apart because of prior hotel arrangements.