

Scholars ask academy to keep large meetings: American Academy of Religion

by [John Dart](#) in the [March 23, 2004](#) issue

Hundreds of members of the large American Academy of Religion have petitioned the AAR board of directors to rescind last year's decision to hold its annual meetings separately from the Society of Biblical Literature, starting in 2008. The concurrent conferences, usually held the weekend before Thanksgiving, have a combined registration annually of more than 8,000 scholars.

The AAR board said in July that a smaller meeting would enable the organization to serve more efficiently and flexibly members' academic interests in a wide range of subjects. Despite objections by scholars in both groups and by publishers who work with both AAR and SBL scholars, the board defended the decision on its Web site and denied that the change would shift the AAR away from Christian, Judaic and theological studies.

"We are theologians, historians, sociologists . . . textual scholars, literary critics," states the AAR online site. "What's more, AAR works constantly to overcome the 'religious studies vs. theological studies' divisions of the past." The board will next meet on April 17, according to AAR Executive Director Barbara DeConcini, who declined comment, saying she could not speak for the board.

The online-posted "referendum," which had attracted more than 1,600 signers by March 4, noted that yearly meetings for some other academic disciplines are larger than the AAR-SBL gatherings. "Our size is a result of our success," said the petition, adding that "the proposed action would cause significantly more problems than it would solve."

The petition was written by Elaine Pagels of Princeton University and Karen L. King of Harvard Divinity School, two scholars active in biblical research and who address contemporary religious issues. "Now is not the time for division, but for continued

and expanded collaboration,” they said.

The meeting has been an important setting for job searches and interviews. Many publishers, who “expressed shock and chagrin” about the change, according to the petition, have said they face the prospect of having to choose between the two meetings to exhibit their books and make contacts with potential authors.

The appeal’s initial 42 signers include former AAR presidents Judith Plaskow, Robert Neville, Ray Hart, Elizabeth Clark and John Dillenberger. The AAR-SBL November meetings, organized by employees who work in the same building in Atlanta, will continue annually through 2007 when they convene in San Diego. But the AAR has scheduled its 2008 meeting for October in Chicago while the SBL plans to meet in Boston that year.