

President's Message

2008: Opportunity For Change

By Paul Storey

A rule was recently discovered in our bylaws which limited the terms of board members to three consecutive years. If we as a group choose to enforce this rule, four of our current board members will have to step down. We will vote on this rule in the November meeting. I strongly recommend we uphold this rule. This rule was originally put forth for a valid reason, to prevent the organization from becoming stagnant with fixed sets of people and ideas. This gives us an opportunity for change.

AOF was founded 1993. Since that time, the internet has come into being and forever changed our lives. Christian conservative talk radio has taken over the AM dial, Fox News and is aggressively pounding their religious based conservative ideologies into politics and influencing election campaigns all over the nation. Politicians openly tout their faith to woo church going voters. A few bright individuals have risen to challenge the attempt of religion to dominate our country. Dawkins 'The God Delusion' and Sam Harris "The End of Faith" would never have made best sellers in 1993. Maher's newly released movie 'Religulous' would never have been funded to be filmed and distributed fifteen years ago. AOF's bylaws prohibit us from demonstrating disdain for religion. Without this rule being clarified, we cannot fully join in the contemporary discussion. Today we are playing with new rules. AOF has to adapt to these changes.

From my tenure as president, I do not see these changes occurring. We need to change our focus, change our policies concerning public statements and advertising, change where we put our time and energy. To do this new leadership needs to be elected to the board of directors.

I feel we are overcommitted. We are trying to support more activities than we have volunteers to do. There is no system to account for the hours we spend as an organization, and the hours required by various activities, so priorities can be chosen and activities with lower importance dropped. No business would leave their employees hours unaccounted, just as they would never neglect to tally their revenue.

Also, we are extremely top heavy with management. Board meetings have 9 people meeting for 3 hours, which is 27 people hours,

every month. That is equivalent to everybody attending our monthly meeting taking a full hour each month to plan the next month's meeting [25 people for 1 hour = 25 people hours] which is ridiculous! This is a complete overkill. The bylaws look like they were set up for a corporation of 5000 people. We have 200. The bylaws and the large board of directors constitute an overgrown bureaucracy which drains our limited energy into an inward focus, rather than directing our time and energy externally. This has been my most important observation over my tenure as president for the last year.

Sac Atheists and Freethinkers has grown to our size in 9 months. They have no board, no rules, no bylaws. Their management overhead is nearly zero. They are attracting a diverse group of young and dynamic thinkers in a fast, free flowing discussion forum.

The trends are clear. AOF has to change.

I recommend:

Leave the founding fathers behind. It is time to turn over the torch to a new generation.

Elect a small group of fresh blood to the board of directors. Five is all that is needed and is completely sufficient. More members add more differences which often never get resolved, causing board meetings to be stressful and unadaptive. The board meetings are an enormous cause of burnout to our hardest working members, who are far more likely to leave AOF later on. I see this as the main contributing factor to our most active, valuable and appreciated people fading from participation in our group.

Streamline operations. Prioritize our activities. Balance our budget. Drop any activities we do not have volunteers to staff.

Cater to a variety of ideas from believers starting to doubt who need to talk about basics like the Bible and contradictions inherent in belief, to mature atheists who have been through the basics years ago and now want information on how we can influence society. Give a rating of each meeting so people can choose which meetings to attend.

Summary: I want to see AOF thrive. From my view as an insider for the last year, the best way to do this is to implement the changes suggested above.

AOF Board Response

Co-signers: Kay Dickey (resigned due to move, Aug 2008), Mynga Futrell, Nancy Gilbert, Don Knutson, Kevin Schultz, Debora Smith

Our organization experienced two especially happy events this year. We celebrated AOF's 15th anniversary, and we became the beneficiaries of a generous bequest.

We are fortunate to have an established group like AOF in our community, and are hopeful for many more years of fellowship, education for the larger community and ourselves, discussions, interesting speakers, and enjoyable events, while fulfilling the founding Mission of AOF.

We feel we must respond to the "President's Message" which contains multiple inaccuracies. There are potentially important consequences for AOF that members should be aware of.

Inaccuracies:

1. He implies our budget is not balanced. Our budget is in a fine and improving state.
2. "Burnout"—we do not know what crowd of fleeing hard workers he is referring to. We have not had any such recent losses, except one Board member who left because of Mr. Storey, not hard work. However, we are now threatened with a significant loss because almost none of the current board members want to remain if our current president serves on the board again.
3. "Over-committed"—Where? Mr. Storey has repeatedly stated that he does not agree with spending time on Outreach activities. In fact, he has ridiculed them and those who perform them (highway cleanup, Davis Meals, and Free-thought Day). He has stated that time spent on them is wasted and they should be dropped. That the individuals who do this work do it gladly, and enjoy working with others to do so, is irrelevant to him. That these activities serve our "Mission" is irrelevant since he does not share this Mission.
4. "Draining energy"—Has occurred only from the frustration this year of having a dysfunctional Board Chair, and not being able to accomplish much, not from too many activities or events. Mr. Storey has ignored the voted will of the board, repeatedly, by continuing to bring up the same

issues. This in turn frustrates and "drains energy". He has expressed that he has no tolerance for leadership or organizational-type tasks, such as preparing and following an agenda, and so he seldom follows through on such.

This could be a crossroads of sorts for AOF. Mr. Storey has an agenda which is completely at odds with our understanding of AOF's mission. We have been doing our best to keep the board's focus on track this year, to be able to get to long range planning and creating a more efficient and involved organization, but it's been difficult. We tried very hard to work with him, hoping things would get better.

There have been many issues that have arisen, but two of overriding concern has been Mr. Storey's stated intent to:

1. Delete the guidelines in the bylaws relating to denouncing or expressing disdain for others' beliefs, or using disparaging terms to describe others or their worldviews.
2. Ignore the stated founding Mission and stop any outreach activities other than member recruitment. Not only are these in direct opposition to what our understanding of AOF's mission is, but such changes put at risk our organization's 501c3 status as a non-profit organization. Mr. Storey has stated that he would like our meetings to be open to "religion bashing", and even suggested we begin a "spiciness rating" for the meetings, so that those who are offended by this can avoid those meetings with a high rating. We opposed this for public meetings, as not consonant with the goal of promoting the understanding and acceptance of atheism.

We are concerned about AOF's future and want it to thrive. We feel that we, or others who are elected, will not be able to wisely consider and proceed with attempts to improve AOF if Mr. Storey stays on the Board. He has shown an inability to lead or to work with others.

We recently started a Board "Retreat" aimed at clarifying our mission, values, and goals, and how we can best fulfill them. This is something that could benefit AOF well down the road. Again, Mr. Storey expressed his view that it was a waste of time.

With proper leadership, AOF will have a bright future. Please help us ensure this future.