
COMMITTEE & TASK FORCE REPORTS

Conference

Megan E. Welsh, University of Colorado Boulder, Chair

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- Cindy Aalders, Regent College
- Jessica Boyer, Mount St. Mary's University
- Craig Kubic, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
- Vance Thomas, Central Baptist Theological Seminary
- Oliver Schulz, Colorado Christian University
- Kris Veldheer, Catholic Theological Union
- Gillian Harrison Cain, Atla Director of Member Programs
- Denise McFarlin, Atla Staff Liaison, Logistics
- Jamie Lin, Atla Staff Liaison, Content

A YEAR IN REVIEW: 2020-2021 CONFERENCE COMMITTEE INITIATIVES

The Conference Committee was busy over the past year! In August 2020, we advertised a new conference proposal submission and notification timeline. This change gave potential presenters more time to think about, prepare, and submit their proposals. In November 2020, we shared plans to host a hybrid conference experience, expecting to have some of us gather in Fort Worth, TX as we acknowledged the importance of making Atla Annual accessible for those who wished to attend virtually. We also announced changes to the proposal submission form which accommodated presentation pref-

ferences depending on presenter plans to attend in person or virtually, and we updated conversation group sessions to be 50 minutes in duration instead of 30 minutes as they were at Atla Annual 2020.

In December of 2020, we hosted a webinar to support potential presenters in preparing their Atla Annual submissions. We covered the different conference session types with hints to help people determine which session they might want to choose for their topic, and we provided best practices for submitting a successful proposal. Then, in March 2021, about a year after many of us in North America faced the initial impacts of the pandemic, we announced that Atla Annual 2021 would move to an exclusively online format. This was a hard decision to make as we so desperately wanted to share the same physical space with one another after a year apart, but it was a decision informed by Atla member plans for attending the conference which were collected in a survey sent by Atla in February 2021. This decision meant that more of our international colleagues could attend Atla Annual 2021 and that the majority of people who expressed that they could not or would not attend an in-person conference could also participate. The Conference Committee, once again, pivoted and directed all of our energy into preparing a rich and engaging virtual conference experience.

ATLA ANNUAL 2021 CONFERENCE REVIEW

We did it! Another Atla Annual has come and gone, and we survived another virtual conference! I am left contemplating how I will incorporate the innovative strategies I learned from colleagues and how I will ask difficult questions to motivate change in my own library context, a theme that arose from Alexia Hudson-Ward's plenary address as she kicked off Atla Annual 2021 Online. She reminded us that we, as individuals and as a society, are not static. We will evolve, and, as we learn and grow, we should take action to improve the world around us. Moving beyond words and taking action can be messy and imperfect, but it is okay to fail forward. Failing forward is part of our learning and growth, and what better lesson to embody as we gradually emerge from a pandemic that has so deeply impacted our lives. How will you move forward over this next year?

This year, we hosted three plenary speakers, four pre-conferences, and thirty-nine concurrent sessions. Many of these sessions reinforced Alexia's message of growth, inclusion, and action: Dr. Safiya Noble's plenary calling librarians to be "people of conscience" and educate ourselves on the pressing social issues that impact so many of our lives; Christopher Lopez and Renee Romero led a pre-conference session challenging the notions of colonial imagination in order to reinforce user-centered design principles; Rebecca Donald and Cindy Lu each shared their research on creating a sense of belonging in theological library spaces; we were invited to engage in the spirit of play by Chris Rosser and Grant Testut; and we were encouraged to think about the needs of the whole learner in Karl Stutzman and Brandon Board's listen and learn session. Conference content was rich and thought-provoking, and many ideas were shared as participants placed questions in the chat and unmuted themselves to mirror the back and forth conversations we have so valued at past, in-person conferences. We added pre-conferences back into the schedule this year, and we embraced new aspects of virtual conferencing: customized snack boxes, as well as structured and unstructured time to socialize with one another in our virtual hotel lobby using the platform Remo.

Overall, 336 participants registered for Atla Annual Online, demonstrating what Dr. Elías Ortega shared in his closing plenary address: "The pandemic world shows that there is not less connection, but more connection." Compared to last year, we were a little bit more prepared for what a virtual conference would look like. We played with emoji reactions, raised our hands, and, best of all, sessions were arranged as meetings for maximum engagement: we could see and message each other!

A lot of work goes into planning a conference, and we need to acknowledge all of those who created such a fulfilling experience. Thank you to our sponsors, especially EBSCO who remains a major sponsor for this conference and activities year round. In all, we hosted thirteen vendors at our vendor social this year, allowing us to mimic the exhibitor hall as best we could in a virtual environment. We could not host such a great event without this crucial support from our sponsors.

Thank you also to the hardworking, yet tireless Atla staff who dedicated long hours to preparing for Atla Annual and handling the behind-the-scenes work that was so often invisible yet resulted in a seamless conference experience for the rest of us. Thank you to our Conference Committee members who worked alongside Atla staff to plan a rich learning experience. Also appreciated is the work that members of the Conference Committee and the Professional Development Committee contributed by hosting sessions. They balanced their own conference experience with emceeding responsibilities which included introducing presenters, keeping track of time, and facilitating questions.

Most of all, thanks to everyone who joined Atla Annual 2021 as attendees! We know many of you would like to return to hallway conversations, hugs and handshakes, and tasty treats and caffeine waiting for you in the reception hall in between sessions. The Conference Committee and Atla staff are also eager for an in-person conference experience, and we cannot wait to see you in Baltimore next June! That said, over the next year, we will be considering ways we can support the robust community of international attendees and those who cannot typically join a place-based conference, yet who have attended our two virtual conferences. We want to be able to include everyone who wishes to join, regardless of location, in some conference activities next year. Stay tuned for more as we work to plan Atla 2022!