

20 March 2020

Dear Colleagues,

SBL staff has stayed in constant contact with the 2020 International Meeting's local planning committee, administrators and staff at the University of Adelaide, and the Adelaide Convention Bureau. We all have also been regularly reviewing updates from the Australian government, the Centers for Disease Control, and the World Health Organization.

While we may harbor hopes for containment of COVID-19 by July, it is responsible to act only on what we know now and to put the health and safety of SBL members and the members of affiliated organizations first.

We are obliged to consider current restrictions, which may or may not be extended to July, and to make decisions in response to the following facts: (1) the Australian government has banned all non-citizens and non-residents from arriving in Australia; (2) the governmental restriction of gatherings to no more than fifty persons precludes the possibility of an in-person conference; and (3) even if travel restrictions are relaxed in the coming months, it is likely that most governments will continue to require a fourteen-day self-quarantine, which would doubly impact travelers upon arrival and return.

The two scenarios that we have all read about also warn against the viability of a July meeting: (1) if communities collectively flatten the curve, the impact of the virus is reduced but its presence may be extended to July; and (2) if communities do not flatten the curve, the infrastructure (especially health care) will be overwhelmed and the after-effects of that impact would be lasting and severe.

Therefore, in consultation with our host university and the local committee, we have reached the consensus that cancelling the 2020 SBL International Meeting is in the best interest of everyone.

In spite of this decision regarding the International Meeting, all indications are that the threat of COVID-19 will be minimized by November and will not significantly impact SBL's Annual Meeting in Boston, Massachusetts. We hope that the Annual Meeting will provide much-needed opportunities for professional development, networking, comradery, and mutual support. The need for community—professional and interpersonal—seems more pressing than ever. Registration for the Annual Meeting will open in a few weeks.

SBL has been actively exploring virtual conferencing models and technology. We considered it for the July meeting, too, but the time-zone difference would make broad participation and tech support by SBL staff in Atlanta exceedingly difficult. It would not be the best environment for testing this option, on such a large scale, and so close to the meeting date. We will, however, continue to explore options for the future, and we are doing so in consultation with peer learned societies and other membership associations for whom meetings play a significant role in their mission and services.

We are all affected by a situation beyond our control. However, I want to recognize those that feel disappointment the most: the local planning committee, the university administration hosting the meeting, the university staff that supported our efforts to plan an exceptional experience, and the local organizations that were meeting with us, namely, the Australian and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools (ANZATS), the Australian Catholic Theological Association (ACTA), and the Australian Catholic Biblical Association (ACBA). The International Meeting is intended to showcase the host

institution's contributions and the unique contribution of scholars from the geographic region; for the 2020 meeting, this included indigenous and Pasifika voices. Those that were preparing a paper for the meeting can likely use that paper for another meeting. The local committee, on the other hand, have spent two years on programs and logistics that will be aborted. **Please join me in recognizing their service: Paul Babie, Vicky Balabanski, Norm Habel, Mark Kulikovsky, Peter Lockwood, and Cathy Thomson. Peter Trudinger chaired the local committee, and we are particularly grateful for his leadership and service.**

The local committee chose the theme of ecology for a meeting motif. They hope that while the world is focused on the short-term issue of the disease we should not lose sight of the long-term stewardship of the environment.

Finally, we especially regret the additional economic impact that cancelling will have on a region already suffering from the devastating bush fires. Economic burden always tragically falls on those that can bear it least.

Stay safe, and I look forward to seeing you in Boston in November.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Kutsko". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

John F. Kutsko
Executive Director