

Candidate Statement
AKRI 2021 Election

Raymond Bakaitis

I am running for a second term as AKRI President. My thinking for doing so and my ideas for the organization are summarized here.

AKRI's center of gravity has shifted over these past two years toward member initiatives. The Board organized online community meetings in response to COVID-19 and police killings of Black citizens. The meetings engaged membership in examining the organization. Member interest prompted competitive elections in 2020. The Dialogues Committee worked in concert with this trend and organized well-attended Dialogues meetings. AKRI Affiliates are organizing creative events. Affiliate Presidents have been meeting with each other and their Affiliate Representatives. The Washington-Baltimore Center has re-affiliated with AKRI. We are re-launching our annual conference this year in a creative collaboration with Group Relations International. AKRI members have organized a diverse and thriving International Cohort Group. AKRI members are organizing a Reparations Committee to examine the effects of systemic racism inside and outside our organization and to propose remediation.

While this is occurring, the AKRI Board is now losing senior, experienced leadership that has been vital in nurturing these initiatives. The Vice-President, the Past-President, and both Affiliate Representatives are all terming out. I believe that as President I can serve as a bridge between the current strong Board leadership and a new generation of AKRI Board leadership.

Here is my vision.

When I began my Presidency, I wrote that I wanted to form a committee that would recommend changes in AKRI's policies, procedures, and culture to redress the effects of white supremacist, patriarchal, heteronormative, and caste-like expectations on our organization. The Board decided that the best course of action for undertaking this work was to first identify AKRI's values, mission, and strategic plan. The Board has been working on this task. Following the Dialogues, a member group spontaneously formed to consider the why and how of making reparations for systemic racism within AKRI. I am heartened that this Reparations Committee is forming. This as an opportunity for the AKRI membership and its governance to work together synergistically to promote significant change. I am committed to using the work of the Reparations Committee to examine how we work and to better align policies, procedure, and culture with our values and mission.

When I began my Presidency, I also wrote that I want to examine the needs and roles of AKRI's international members within the organization and AKRI's role in the international group relations community. As with reparations, a self-authorized grassroots members group has spontaneously formed around these issues - the International Cohort Group. The cohort members offer support to each other and explore questions about AKRI's relation to international complexity. It is in our interest to learn from this group's work and consider what it represents within AKRI as a whole.

This exploration of reparations and international complexity is relevant not only to AKRI's internal world but externally as well. Deeply pursuing these inquiries can lead to our creative collaboration with group relations practitioners outside AKRI. AKRI is not responsible for U.S. foreign policy, yet AKRI exists as the American group relations organization and carries the American national legacy in our character. Racism and colonialism overlap. What can we learn from engaging in group relations explorations with people in nations with whom the U.S. has a fraught history? For example, trauma was inflicted not only upon Africans who were brought to this country as slaves but also upon disrupted families and communities left behind. What might we learn from group relations oriented dialogue with people in Western Central Africa nations? Similarly, what could we learn about projections, introjections, and representations present in our American psyche and in the psyches of people that have been on the receiving end of U.S. assertions of power? I'm thinking of nations like Viet Nam, the Dominican, Philippines, Iran, and Native Americans among others. I propose that AKRI support members who initiate dialogue, however tentatively, with people in such countries who have interest in group relations thinking. We could all learn from such work. AKRI's support for member initiatives could take the form of consultation, financial assistance, and reflection.

The subject of financial assistance connects to the work of AKRI's Finance Committee. The Board and the Finance Committee are beginning to examine how that Committee can better integrate financial decision-making with AKRI's values, mission, and strategic planning. Clearer articulation of who AKRI is and what our mission is would enhance fund-raising activities and grant-writing to generate more revenue. The Finance Committee can also use AKRI's values, mission, and strategic plan as a compass when deciding where to allocate funds to support Affiliate and member initiatives. The Finance Committee's deliberations are also likely to be central in reparations discussions.

Related to mission I believe AKRI needs to better promote the application of group relations conference learning. The Board has noted that in general we do a poor job of offering post-conference review and application groups (P-RAGs). We are not sufficiently engaging new and younger conference members to see the relevance of conference learning to work and community life. The Board began to discuss the idea of organizing a collective of AKRI members who would be competent and willing to work as consultants to post-conference review and application groups. The idea

would be to make the collective a resource for Affiliates to more easily organize P-RAGs following their conferences. If there is interest among the Affiliates, I want to work with them to design a method for organizing and making P-RAG consultation available as a resource for Affiliates.

Finally, if AKRI aspires to be an influential organization it needs to draw from its intellectual roots and develop its research and publication muscle. Competition for consulting roles at conferences and experimentation with innovative conference themes and designs are welcome. At the same time, in order to be meaningful, innovation must be grounded in a tradition. The intellectual tradition of group relations work is systems psychodynamics. We need to offer more educational programs and seminars that link our intellectual traditions to contemporary problems. Related, we do not have a functioning research and publication committee. It would benefit members to have a vehicle for writing about their experiences, their thinking, and their research. An early goal might be to publish in-house written summaries of Dialogues presentations. Success in doing so could lead to more ambitious and admittedly much long-term goals such as journal submissions or a Fourth Reader.

I've outlined the policy interests I would promote in the President role. I want to address other issues as well.

Given discussions that have come up at our member meetings, I want to be open about how I view AKRI's mission. I view AKRI as a member educational organization. I believe our learning model can be applied to many different areas. Social justice and democracy are the areas of application that most interest me.

I'm aware that my identity as an older, straight white man who is a mental health professional has meaning for people. Undoubtedly that meaning differs for different people. I'm also aware that since I have been involved with AKRI our Presidents have all been white and mostly male. I'm aware that the Board has had two resignations this year – a mixed ethnic gay man and a queer Black non-binary member. Their reasons for resigning differ but in both cases the resignations are related to stresses of Board work. This raises deep questions regarding how the Board operates, what dominant cultural values are present but unrecognized, what values are desired, and how the membership uses the Board. The “new” Board, along with the membership, will need to address these questions when it convenes October 1. This can be a piece of the more comprehensive examination of who AKRI is as an organization.

I'm offering myself as a candidate for another term as President because I believe the experience I have gained in the role this year has value for the organization at this moment. The energy and enthusiasm in the Affiliates and the member grassroots groups is compelling and promising. I want to nurture and grow this potential. I've

outlined my thinking and the priorities I would promote in another term. Thank you for the support you have already given me. I am fortunate and grateful to be working with and learning from so many people whom I enjoy, admire, and, in some instances, love.

Ray