

Epistle from the South Central Yearly Meeting
of the Religious Society of Friends
2024 Annual Sessions
3rd month, 24th through 31st days, 2024

Warmest greetings of peace and goodwill to our beloved Friends everywhere,

“It is a good year for bluebonnets.” With wildflowers blooming and nestled in breezy, lush rolling hills, Friends from Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas met in Bruceville, Texas, for the 2024 Annual Sessions of South Central Yearly Meeting. We met on unceded Waco, Tonkawa, and Kickapoo lands, acknowledging and calling to mind the atrocities and injustices that Indigenous peoples faced as a result of the actions of white settlers. We realize that we have reaped benefits, directly or indirectly, from these historic abuses and systemic exploitation of those who cared for God’s creation long before us. Many in our Yearly Meeting are active in working to establish right relationships with Indigenous peoples, and we applaud these efforts.

We gathered for a week of worship, fellowship, learning, and growing around the theme “Being a Quaker Today: Nurturing Our Soul, Brightening Our Light, and Acting on Our Faith.” During the early part of the week when Friends gathered online, we reconnected with each other, shared in social time, worship sharing, and a workshop session. There seems to be greater sense of connectedness among Friends in this post-COVID era, fostered in part by our continued use of video conferencing. This is perhaps one of the few lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic that we embrace and is likely to remain a vital part of our Meetings and our ministries. For the second part of the week, Friends gathered at Greene Family Camp with some Friends continuing to be with us online. We were joined by Friends from our wider Quaker community as well as representatives from Quaker organizations both in person and online. We cherished our time together with shared meals, worship sharing in home groups, and conducting the business of the Yearly Meeting. We thank God for bringing us back to this sacred space for another Yearly Meeting.

A spirit of unity and togetherness was infused into our Meetings for Worship with Attention to Business by reading excerpts from State of the Meeting reports from our constitutive monthly meetings as well as hearing from you, our beloved Friends, in reading Epistles selected from Yearly Meetings the world over. Our Friends worshipping in Fayetteville, Arkansas, wrote in their State of the Meeting report, “The strong sense that we are led by the Spirit in our Meeting for Worship informs all we do. It is the bedrock in the silence and vocal ministry. Spirit is our guiding light, the core of the meeting.” We were delighted to hear the news that Friends in Central Europe had discerned the leading to form the Central European Yearly Meeting, and we send them much love and many blessings.

Our Adult Programming Committee invited Pamela Haines from Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting, to join us in worship and fellowship as well as to deliver our keynote address. In her talk, Pamela explored spiritual practices with us that have grounded and guided her work as a Quaker activist, teacher, and author. Specifically, Pamela challenged us to “show up in service to the sacred,” recognizing that all moments, places, and people are sacred but can sometimes be soiled with desecration. During time with our home groups, we explored what makes a moment, a person, a place, and an institution sacred to us as individuals. Claiming our places within the sacred and addressing the desecration with an open heart can make us whole again. Being a Quaker today and being in service to the sacred requires us to embark on paths and journeys with destinations unknown. Being a Quaker today requires us to nurture our soul, brighten our Light, and act on our faith.

The Peace and Justice Committee held a forum early in the week to hear social and societal concerns from Friends in our Yearly Meeting. After hearing from the Committee, SCYM was led to minute a re-affirmation of our support of a Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies. Friends acknowledged that Quakers operated some of these schools where Indigenous children were forcibly indoctrinated with Euro-American culture, language, and religion. This proposed Commission will be another positive step towards right relationships between our two communities, but we acknowledge that much work still remains. The Peace and

Justice Committee showed the film “Two Rivers” which documents a reconciliation group between an Indigenous and white community in Washington state. The Committee also brought forward a minute on the plight of our unhoused neighbors and asked Monthly Meetings to explore what can be done in our local communities to ensure affordable, safe, and reliable housing. One Friend asked about language used to describe this issue. Friends agreed to season the usage of the terms “homeless” versus “unhoused” through queries from the Committee.

Throughout our time together, Friends sat with the weight of the horrific war in Gaza. A deep discussion around a minute in response to the war was solemn, yet rich and Spirit-led, with many Friends sharing ministry. Just as the nation and the world have passionate feelings around this issue, so too do Friends of South Central Yearly Meeting. It was clear that Friends had strong convictions that were not in unity as we began to discern this minute, but a well-seasoned Friend reminded us that, “What we are seeking here is unity under the leadership of the Spirit.” Honoring that of God in everyone, the Body was led to affirm our unwavering commitment to the Peace Testimony which leads us to “utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretense *whatsoever*.” Our Peace and Justice Committee will formulate queries to guide our monthly meetings in discussion of this concern. As it is written, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.”

Friends continue to hold the SCYM Faith and Practice Committee in prayer. This committee’s work has been greatly aided by video conferencing, and the committee meets monthly to discuss content and feedback from individual Friends and Meetings. After presenting a first draft of the document at the 2023 Annual Sessions, the committee presented a second draft this year. A forum and workshop were held to discuss the progress on this important document. The Clerk of this Committee expressed his appreciation for the hard work of the Friends who, guided by the Spirit, have contributed to this work. Now, as the draft document reads, “we are again seeking through this Faith and Practice to describe who we are within the Religious Society of Friends worldwide and give voice to both our distinctiveness and how we fit into the Society of Friends.” – Faith and Practice (Draft), South Central Yearly Meeting, section 1, p. 4.

121 Friends gathered for our Annual Sessions including 12 young Friends who participated in their own programming thanks to our Youth Program Support Committee. 22 Friends attended Annual Sessions for the first time, bringing new faces and ever widening our community. As is certain with the passage of time, Friends heard memorial minutes for 11 Friends, and we give thanks for their well-lived lives. May their memories and their legacies be blessings to us all. We joyously received news of 5 births within our Meetings and unite with Friends who celebrated 3 marriages. We are blessed by our ever-growing circle of Friends and the strengthening of our community. In an example of our shared ministry, care, and nurture of Friends, several were able to record readings of Bible passages for a wise Friend with declining vision. We continue to be in awe of the creative ways that we are called to serve, including by sharing talents in a variety fun hour.

We send you, our beloved Friends, much love and every peace, the peace that surpasses all understanding.