



South Central Yearly Meeting

*of the Religious Society of Friends
in Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Missouri & Texas*

To Friends Everywhere:

We greet you from the bluebonnet covered hill country of Texas where we are asking ourselves the question, which is the theme for this South Central Yearly Meeting, 2014—Am I My Sisters' and Brothers' Keeper?: Quaker Response to Mass Incarceration.

For the past fifteen years women have been incarcerated in Oklahoma at a rate that is twice the national average. Three states in our Yearly Meeting—Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas—rank first, third, and fourth in US incarceration rates. Across the country there has been a five-fold increase in incarceration, largely for nonviolent drug offenses. A former Brooklyn prosecutor, Lewis Webb, with the American Friends Service Committee, engaged us in an interactive keynote presentation that was rich in factual information about prisons, sentencing, and the political and financial sources that support abuses in our penal system. The evening brought home to us the importance of this issue. Workshops addressed possible actions such as The Smarter Sentencing Act of 2013, S. 1410. of the Friends Committee on National Legislation. Lewis Webb's fireside chat also gave us ideas that might ease injustice for individuals in local courts. Examples included actions such as paying for individuals' probation fees, jail bonds, or simply going in groups in silence to witness local trials.

The theme continued throughout the weekend: in our worship sharing we were gathered around the stories of Friends who have visited or corresponded with prisoners on death row. In a World-Wide Cafe exercise, we met a series of changing small groups to share our own thoughts and experiences with incarceration. Our peace and justice committee meeting generated so many ideas that we had to choose which ones to focus on first for Representative Meeting.

Our Yearly Meeting continued to innovate. This year, rather than a written document, our State of the Monthly Meeting Reports were artistic representations displayed on the walls, from graphic art to a 12-foot photo collage of the Live Oak Friends Meeting in Houston. We continued a relatively new practice having Home Groups for worship sharing. In our business sessions we took care to use microphones to electronically capture complete proceedings for the recording clerk. **We celebrated the 20th Anniversary of Friends Peace Teams, noting we were the first Yearly Meeting to join that group.** We also renewed our connection to isolated Friends and small meetings. One Friend, with our support, traveled over 16,000 miles last year in her mission to listen to and nurture those members of our Yearly Meeting. We extended ourselves to her work for the coming year.

Twenty-nine children and youth attended our yearly meeting. Our littlest Friends heard stories, did art, played, took walks, and had guitar and banjo music played to them, while the elementary children made papier mache, did a treasure hunt, and participated in other fun activities. After the Easter Egg hunt on Sunday morning, the children participated in an

Easter Godly Play/Faith-and-Play **story**. Twelve Junior Young Friends together with our three Young Friends did a ropes course and spent time with our keynote speaker, Lewis Webb, and Public Defenders from Delaware discussing the court **system and incarceration issues**. Junior Young Friends noted a naughty English Terrier causing a ruckus during their activities, and they also rescued a dog that had been **locked in a closet**. Their skit rehearsal for Family Fun night was **only interrupted nine times**. SCYM's Family Fun night just keeps getting better, funnier, and more fun

Spring temperatures made for a relaxing conversation as we strolled between events. And the musical talents of some of our Friends lifted the hearts of those who sang along or listened.

Yes, it's been a good Yearly Meeting