

Epistle from the South Central Yearly Meeting 2021 Annual Sessions

28th Day, 3rd Month to 4th Day, 4th Month, 2021 via videoconferencing platform Zoom

To Friends here, there, and everywhere,

Greetings in the name of peace, love, and the Light! The South Central Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) met via Zoom this year for our annual sessions. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic gave us little alternative but to meet virtually again in 2021 to worship God together, enjoy fellowship, and conduct our business, all from the safety and comfort, albeit isolation, of our own homes.

We continued last year's theme of "Loving in the Light: Quaker Engagement in Times of Crisis, Part II." One of the week's workshops focused our attention on indigenous peoples who once cared for the lands we now inhabit, and Friends were encouraged to identify these tribes in their Zoom screen name.

Friends from our Arkansas-Oklahoma Quarterly Meeting discerned the need to revisit this theme and challenged us to dig deep, be bold and love fiercely as we sought guidance from the Spirit to address the crises of today that we, as people of a shared faith, must meet with integrity, unity, love, and peace.

We discussed race relations in our country, climate change, police brutality, economic justice, extreme political polarization and political violence. We acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected us as individuals, monthly meetings, and as a yearly meeting. Throughout our sessions, we aimed to act in love, peace, and charity, guided by Spirit and our shared faith.

One seasoned Friend noted that people embrace the idea that Friends collectively discern a way forward, and that there's power in having the strength of that communal discernment to illuminate our path. The wisdom of these sage voices continues to bless us as we walk in unity to seek Truth.

Quaker author and activist Eileen Flanagan guided our week-long session events and delivered the keynote speech. In it she shared her insights and experiences on how we as Friends are called to engage with the world we live in, and to work for the world we want.

Eileen shared stories of her path in activism, particularly her work with the Earth Quaker Action Team opposing mountaintop-removal coal mining. It gave us a new perspective for the crises we face and how to approach them. She also reminded us of our responsibility—our duty even—to listen for God's call by challenging injustice and laboring with love and perseverance until we achieve a society and a world where peace, harmony, unity, charity, integrity, and equality are the norms, not the outliers.

She recalled the struggles of the civil rights movement and shared the wisdom of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., when he said, "Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice; and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love."

We saw that while we stand at an inflection point in the climate crisis, we see the growing urgency of the danger and injustice faced daily by people who identify as black, indigenous, and people of color. We must now act with love and finally do the work to create that just, peaceful, and equitable society for all. And then we must sustain it with love. We call on Friends everywhere to answer God's call and join us in this work.

Our Peace and Justice Forum brought two minutes forward. We aligned with the "No Way to Treat a Child" campaign, which seeks an immediate end to the unlawful and unconscionable military detention of Palestinian children by Israeli Defense Forces. This minute recognizes that our own government also detains migrant refugee children. SCYM denounces such practices and calls upon our elected leaders to abolish them.

The other minute we endorsed asks for no-knock search warrants to be banned by all levels of government for all levels of law enforcement. We recognize more work remains for us to do, addressing policies and practices; we must recognize these moral imperatives and act when the Spirit leads us.

The Peace and Justice Committee further requested that the Yearly Meeting make a discretionary gift to the Olympia (WA) Friends Meeting (North Pacific YM) in support of their efforts in Quaker outreach and social justice in Uganda. Several of our monthly meetings and many individual Friends have supported their efforts in the past, and this request was met with unified approval.

Of special importance this year, acting on the long-time work of the Youth Program Support Committee, we approved their Child Abuse Prevention Policy, which documents modern-day definitions, advices, concerns, and legal requirements for groups that work with children. We are thankful for their work and guidance on this important topic.

We received reports from representatives to various Quaker, interfaith, and activist groups, and the work that Friends have done over the past year continues to be a source of inspiration and hope in the midst of these crises we face. The Faith and Practice committee of our Yearly Meeting has been busy in the past year discerning the leadings of Spirit and continuing their important work in formulating a document that will serve and support Friends with grace, integrity, and love for many generations to come. We hold this committee, as well as all other committees of SCYM, in the Light as they continue to do the important work of Friends throughout the year.

Sadly, the past year has seen so much grief and loss, and Friends in our Yearly Meeting were not immune to it. At our final business meeting, we shared memorial minutes of nine Friends who had died since the last Yearly Meeting. We mourn their loss, but take comfort in knowing that their spirit and legacy live on and that joy cometh with the morning. Friends were delighted to celebrate the births of two children into the Friends Meeting of Austin and one child into the Friends Meeting of New Orleans.

We were blessed to have 101+ SCYM Friends from Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas registered this year. We welcomed 18 visitors from the Britain, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Pacific, Iowa (Conservative), Lake Erie, Southern Appalachian, and New York Yearly Meetings, as well as FGC, FCNL, and AFSC. Several unaffiliated Friends also entered our mix. We participated in fellowship at virtual dining tables, participated in worship sharing, and had virtual sing-alongs, campfires, and a family story-time. Friends also shared their individual talents with each other at the Variety Show. We marked Good Friday with a reading of the Passion of Jesus Christ from the Gospel. We continue to be thankful for the work of the Yearly Meeting Planning committee in organizing this event.

Karen Takemoto (Fayetteville Friends Meeting) clerked our business sessions, Howard Hawhee (Friends Meeting of Austin) served as associate clerk, and Jessica Arjet (Friends Meeting of Austin) recorded our minutes. We are especially grateful for Friend Karen, who kept us on task and on time, all the while maintaining her gentle Friendly spirit, shepherding us through our work.

In this strange blend, the latest tech of Zoom meetings connected Friends from our far-flung yearly meeting to conduct our work and be “together,” while we stayed safely at home in our own “caves.” Our spirits and our screens came together in community, yet we miss joining Friends at Greene Family Camp. We wholeheartedly look forward to our next in-person gathering, date uncertain, for our Easter weekend retreats in the sweet spring countryside of central Texas. God has richly blessed and ordained the work of the South Central Yearly Meeting. We continue to be in community with you, each other, and Friends all over the world as we work for that sacred time when peace may prevail on Earth and in the hearts and minds of all who inhabit it. Sandra Cronk once wrote, “Peace is a gift, but it does not come magically through our passivity. Only in our faithful response to God’s call do we receive God’s peace.”