

Epistle from the South Central Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

2023 Annual Sessions
4th month, 2nd through 9th days, 2023

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

Friends from Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas met in early Spring in a blended onsite/online fashion near Bruceville, Texas, on lands once cared for by the Waco, Tonkawa, and Kickapoo indigenous peoples. Following the success of the blended format of the 2022 Annual Sessions, Friends in the South Central Yearly Meeting (SCYM) met for a week of worship and fellowship. We gathered with 105 Friends in attendance at these annual sessions. 18 of those joined our sessions online, and 87 joined in person. We welcomed Friends living as far away as New York and Vermont back “home” to South Central Yearly Meeting. One Friend is traveling as we meet and joined our online sessions from Hawaii. Another Friend marked his 60th Yearly Meeting annual sessions, having attended faithfully since he was just one year old. Children in attendance ages 4 to 16 brightened our Spirits. Friends are celebrating the births of two children and two marriages under the care of our monthly meetings. As is certain with the passage of time, we heard memorial minutes for 7 friends who had died within the last year. May their memories be a blessing.

As the global COVID-19 pandemic continues to ease, many Quaker organizations have resumed meeting in-person. Friends represented SCYM to these groups, growing individually, and strengthening the ties of faith and Friendship with the wider Quaker community. Accordingly, Friends of SCYM have shared in joy and gratitude as we listened to Friends recount their experiences fostering new relationships and building community. Friends feel a great sense of gratitude and spiritual nourishment being connected to Quakers near and far.

The highest purpose of any Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends is to know and love God and each other in “that which is eternal.” The Spirit of God, speaking to us through Friend Greg Casillas of the Friends Meeting of San Antonio, delivered the Meeting’s keynote as a reflection on our theme, “Spiritual Refreshment for the Long Haul.” We were asked, “If I am not charged, how can I recharge others?” and Friends were gently and lovingly reminded that it is not selfish to practice self-care as a spiritual exercise. Greg encouraged each of us to ask ourselves, “How does my spirituality serve others with whom I am in community?” Throughout the Yearly Meeting, Friends were led to share ministries during our times of Worship and fellowship. The seed of God within us all was greatly nurtured by workshops, mural-making, and worship sharing.

While we gather amongst the lush greenery and blooming wildflowers of Texas, our hearts still break as war continues to ravage Eastern Europe and in other places of the world with acute violence erupting between Israel, Palestine, and Lebanon. We gather in peace and in love to discern our collective way forward in a world plagued by violence, oppression, disastrous climate change, and human suffering. During this time of struggle, Friends continue to lean on one another as we were reminded by Friend Greg Casillas that, “We have more than one Friend because one Friend can’t do it all for us.” We came together searching for spiritual refreshment so that “our Light may be ever-present and may lead someone out of darkness.” We have faith that the collective and transformative power of love we give to the world will surely be a shining beacon of peace amongst the chaos. Friends minuted their support for establishing and supporting peacemaking dialogue between SCYM and Friends in both Ukraine and Russia. Another topic of concern Friends were led to minute was the establishment and promotion of apartheid-free communities, particularly as it relates to the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Friends further minuted an affirmation of the rights of transgender individuals as a witness to our testimony of equality. After careful discernment and discussion, Friends minuted an affirmation of the necessity of access to safe and legal reproductive healthcare as well as an acknowledgment of the right of individual decision-making. Friends were mindful that, individually, we may have views on this matter that fall all along the spectrum. Friends engaged in a weighty and deep discussion on SCYM’s response to the epidemic of gun violence in the United States. We were unable to reach unity on this matter, but this concern will continue to be threshed by Friends. We pray for

God's guidance, strength, and willingness to follow Spirit in acting on these concerns, knowing that way will open.

Friends give thanks for the work that God and Spirit have ordained. We give thanks for those Friends who have spent countless hours organizing our annual sessions, representing SCYM at other Meetings, and continuing to be in corporate and personal ministry to our communities. At these annual sessions, we are especially grateful for the work of the Faith and Practice Committee. After many years of toiling in the spiritual vineyard, the committee harvested the first fruits of their labors and presented to the Yearly Meeting a first draft of the SCYM Book of Faith and Practice. Over the next year, Friends will season the committee's work and provide feedback on the document. We pray for God to grant us wisdom to discern the leadings of the Spirit as we describe our experiential and experimental faith in writing.

Our constituent monthly meeting in Oklahoma City communicated to the Yearly Meeting their unity in declaring their disaffiliation from SCYM. During our Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business, we acknowledged their declaration of disaffiliation. Friends feel pain and sadness, but we commit ourselves to holding this Meeting and these Friends in the Light. Friends acknowledged in our State of the Meeting report that very few persons of color attend our monthly meetings and harm has been done to persons of color by Friends and our monthly meetings. As was so eloquently stated by our Friends in France Yearly Meeting in their 2022 Epistle, "The power of the Spirit can manifest itself anywhere, even in the face of adversity."

Friend Bill Wilkinson, the presiding Clerk of SCYM, invited Friends to reflect on some ad hoc queries throughout our time together. "What does SCYM look like going forward?" "How has it changed?" "Is SCYM different from when our Friend first attended 60 years ago?" Out of the silence of Worship, one Friend remarked that, "It may not be our organization that lives on, but what will is the way that Friends live their faith." There is no problem that love cannot solve.

We send all Friends much love and every peace in the search for Truth.