

Southeastern Yearly Meeting

Quakers in Florida, southeast Georgia & South Carolina

Yearly Gathering
27 - 31 Third Month 2024

Epistle

Dearest Friends,

Ninety-five of us, including nine youth and two wee Friends, gathered at the DaySpring Episcopal Conference Center in Parrish, Florida, while fourteen joined online. This was the 60th gathering of the Southeastern Yearly Meeting.

Over the next four days we worshiped, and workshopped, laughed, and loved and did the Meeting's business. There was some heavy rain at first, but soon the skies cleared and the spring weather turned balmy. The trees were in full leaf, herons and swallowtail kites soared overhead; doves cooed in the mornings; the hospitality of the Conference Center staff was warm and welcoming. Minor challenges were overcome; representatives of Quaker organizations shared their materials; old acquaintances were lovingly renewed; new affinities were discovered, bold initiatives were undertaken—or at least referred for continuing, hopeful discernment. At the end of the gathering, we could all agree that the Southeastern Yearly Meeting will carry on speaking truth and faith through another year in these turbulent times.

The theme of this year was The Friends we are becoming: embracing our longings & leadings. We were joined by representatives from American Friends Service Committee, Friends Committee on National Legislation, Friends General Conference, Quaker House, Quaker Voluntary Service, and Right Sharing of World Resources. Members and visiting representatives led us through workshops on the spiritual journey, immigrant rights, supporting trans life, living our Quaker faith LOUDLY, individual spiritual discernment, right balance in our use of things, cultural differences and racism, and personal spiritual narratives. Morning worshipers greeted the sunrise in reverent silence. Evening activities combined dancing and talent shows with videos and lectures on Quaker concerns.

The Meeting's plenary sessions received reports and considered weighty topics. Of particular concern was the ongoing wars in Gaza, Israel and Palestine, and Ukraine. Friends expressed concern for all victims of war. We were deeply affected by the violence in Gaza and heard reports from monthly meetings that made public statements calling for a permanent cease fire. Diminished attendance in monthly meetings is an abiding concern and Friends spoke urgently about the need for better coordination of youth programs and outreach to the wider community.

The SEYM Quaker Call Committee addressed pain SEYM Quakers are feeling from the brutal, heartless, and relentless assault upon our core values made by the current governmental administration in Florida and beyond. It is seeking a way of uniting SEYM Quakers behind a project or projects that will actively, but non-violently, respond to that assault by turning its own energy against itself, or by being a "pattern or example" of a better alternative than that which has been

chosen by the State of Florida. We are urged to accept responsibility for getting ourselves into physical, mental, and spiritual shape, in order to engage effectively in what increasingly feels like a direct spiritual conflict; to discern, accept, and fulfill the urgent call of the Spirit to live our spirituality clearly, proudly, and loudly, in order that we can respond to the Spirit in others, and they can respond to the Spirit in us.

The Walton Lecture and Retreats came to us from Hilary Burgin of Quaker Voluntary Service. Hilary gave us the marvelous analogy of Truth as a fractal pattern. In times of trouble, it can be difficult to find the divine, but we can always access something of the truth and find way forward. Focus on process, she encouraged us, not on outcomes. “We create what we are by doing the next thing next.”

Amy Richards captured the spirit of our gathering with a poem:

Battle weary heart despairing
Grief clouds in war worn caring
Yet love remains
In laughter of Friends of old and jesting banter
Popcorn singing dancing mirth
Renew our soul in new spring birth
Another day
Another year
Hope remains amidst the fear
Fear the dance business
Bringing the steps well-known
It feels so good to finally be home.
The work continues while Grace abounds
A soft sweet voice that Joy has found.
It is not lost as once was found
Just in the arms of Friends so dear
Stand fast threshing motions passing
A budget balanced

We depart in loving fellowship, glad in each other and our Quaker faith.

Tallahassee Monthly Meeting
Southeastern Yearly Business Meeting
27 – 31 Third Month 2024

Statement on Conflict in Israel-Palestine

We are heartbroken by the terror, violence, and devastation in Israel and Palestine.

Our Quaker faith reminds us that there is that of God within every person, without exception. And that every person has the capacity to experience and respond to the love and guidance of God.

As a result, we unite with the calls of people across the world for:

1. a permanent ceasefire now,
2. immediate release of the hostages,
3. the provision of urgent humanitarian aid to Gaza,
4. and the creation of an independent sovereign state of Palestine beside the State of Israel.

We unconditionally oppose bigotry against Jews, Palestinians and other Arabs and Muslims that has led to the rise in hateful rhetoric and actions targeting these communities in the United States and worldwide.

The government of the United States has a responsibility — and an opportunity – to think with greater vision rather than contributing to the further militarizing of a tragic situation. We urge the President and Congress to join with other nations to address the roots of war and to work for a lasting solution that provides for security, justice, and dignity for all Palestinians and Israelis.

Our faith challenges us to resist the escalating pressures throughout our human family that attempt to justify atrocities against other human beings, and to remember that we are each capable of evil, even in the name of good. We take up the commitment to turn from our own hostile impulses, from amplifying division within our local communities, and from the cycles of vengeful action in conflicts worldwide, so we can move toward the courageous work of peacebuilding.

Let us seek paths to work for peace with the tools available to us. We are called to act in faith and love, with persistence, patience, and courage, as partners and hands of the divine spirit as we pursue the sacred goal of peace, shalom, salaam.

Tallahassee Meeting
of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

St. Petersburg Monthly Meeting
Southeastern Yearly Business Meeting
27 – 31 Third Month 2024

Minute on Reproductive Rights

This minute by the St Petersburg Monthly Meeting (SPMM) ad hoc Committee on Reproductive Rights was approved by the SPMM Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business on 5/21/23.

The members of the St. Petersburg Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends draw on our shared faith and practice in approving this minute as a testimony of our beliefs.

Origin of our Opinion

Through the testimonies and practice of our Quaker belief we respect the individuality of each person's spiritual journey, knowing that decisions can lead to both endings and beginnings, often in unexpected ways. The decision to have, or not have, children and the decision of whom to marry, or not marry, are examples of deeply personal, individual decisions to be made by the person or people involved, in the presence of Spirit.

Sanctity of Life

We acknowledge the sanctity of all life, honor and value the beauty of procreation. We recognize that an embryo's potential to thrive is wholly dependent on the support and nurturing of a biological or chosen family and of society. We seek to value this by addressing injustice, inequity, and coercion in society's present stance on reproductive health.

Privacy of Health Decisions

We affirm life by endorsing laws and policies that provide access to comprehensive reproductive medicine, including access to safe and legal abortion care, for women and families. We hold that the many-faceted impacts of both pregnancy and the termination of that pregnancy, including abortion care, is a profoundly personal health care decision which should be decided by a pregnant person in consultation with their doctor and their partner if they find it appropriate. We affirm life by respecting and protecting the inalienable right every human has to determine their individual role in human reproduction and family planning. We believe that no other rights of any government, group, or individual supersede this right.

Immorality of Forced Pregnancy

We come to this view by acknowledging the historical litany of suffering caused by forced procreation and its kindred injustice, outlawed procreation. These are dual horrors which have been wielded by persons and groups of certain classes, parties, races, sexes, and genders at various times and in various places to enforce their sometimes legal, yet always unequal and morally illegitimate, privileged status among their fellow humans.

Education

The discussion of women's reproductive health must be divorced from biased, politically motivated, misinformation. We call for medically accurate sex education for all ages on the safe practice and choices related to sexual behavior. Information relating to sex, contraception and termination of pregnancy (abortion) care must be easily accessible and delivered in a truthful, non-coercive environment without religious bias of any sort. It is vital to the well-being of our communities that quality and affordable medical care and comprehensive sex education should be available to everyone.

Religious Liberty

We support rights of conscience, freedom of religion, and separation of church and state. We value honest religious liberty which upholds the right of each person to make their own faith-based or conscience-based healthcare decisions. Each person should have opportunity for personal deliberation in accordance with their own moral codes, faith beliefs and consciences, and access to the level of care they believe is right for them. We reject any notion that religious, governing, or political bodies should have any say whatsoever in women's reproductive health decisions. Religious leaders and government officials have no business imposing their personal faith strictures or religious definitions of medical services into the laws of the land or the private lives of women and families. We protest the enshrinement of any faith strictures as public policy and disassociate ourselves from these restrictive voices.

Criminalization

We are opposed to recent federal and state legal actions which threaten the autonomy of pregnant peoples' bodies, and which criminalize their private, personal decisions. We should not be outlawing an individual's right to choose an abortion, which historically has led to many tragic cases of desperation and death. We reject the reasoning that would enable judges and legislatures to ban abortion and promote forced birth. We believe we should work to decriminalize any such decisions, and to preserve an individual's right and ability to carry out their decision.

Parenthood Rights

We believe that every child should be wanted, cared for and educated in a safe, healthy and loving, environment. Our society must share the responsibility of ensuring families and children realize their full potential and aid the termination a pregnancy if desired. In the case of non-consensual conception, sexual abuse, domestic violence, health concerns and even birthing situations where trauma is not present, the health and desire of the person giving birth is paramount.

Future Ramifications

As a religious organization that adheres to the testimony of equality, we believe that rights and equitable access to care must be available to all individuals and provided where their needs can best be met. An acceptance of all the variables in regard to sexuality and gender must be introduced at all levels of society so that the rights of all parents and their children may be respected. The current frenzy of exclusion which is marginalizing and demonizing non-heterosexual parents and their families must be reversed. We are opposed to any restrictions affecting same sex and transgender families.

Societal support

We seek a country with an equitable health care system that does not impose the greatest burdens on those least able to bear them. We must maintain and improve the physical and mental health of our population with affordable, equitable, and accessible healthcare that covers the entire life span, from family planning, contraception access, and prenatal care to end-of-life care.

All families must have equal opportunities to prosper. One of the most significant factors that lead to mental and physical health failure and the termination of pregnancies is poverty. Along with prioritizing public health services and affordable health care with robust federal support, we must target poverty, ensuring that policies regarding family must also include a living wage, paid family leave, affordable housing, affordable childcare, and high-quality public schools.

It is our belief that implementation of such measures will lead to a more affirming and nurturing society.

Saint Petersburg Meeting
of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)