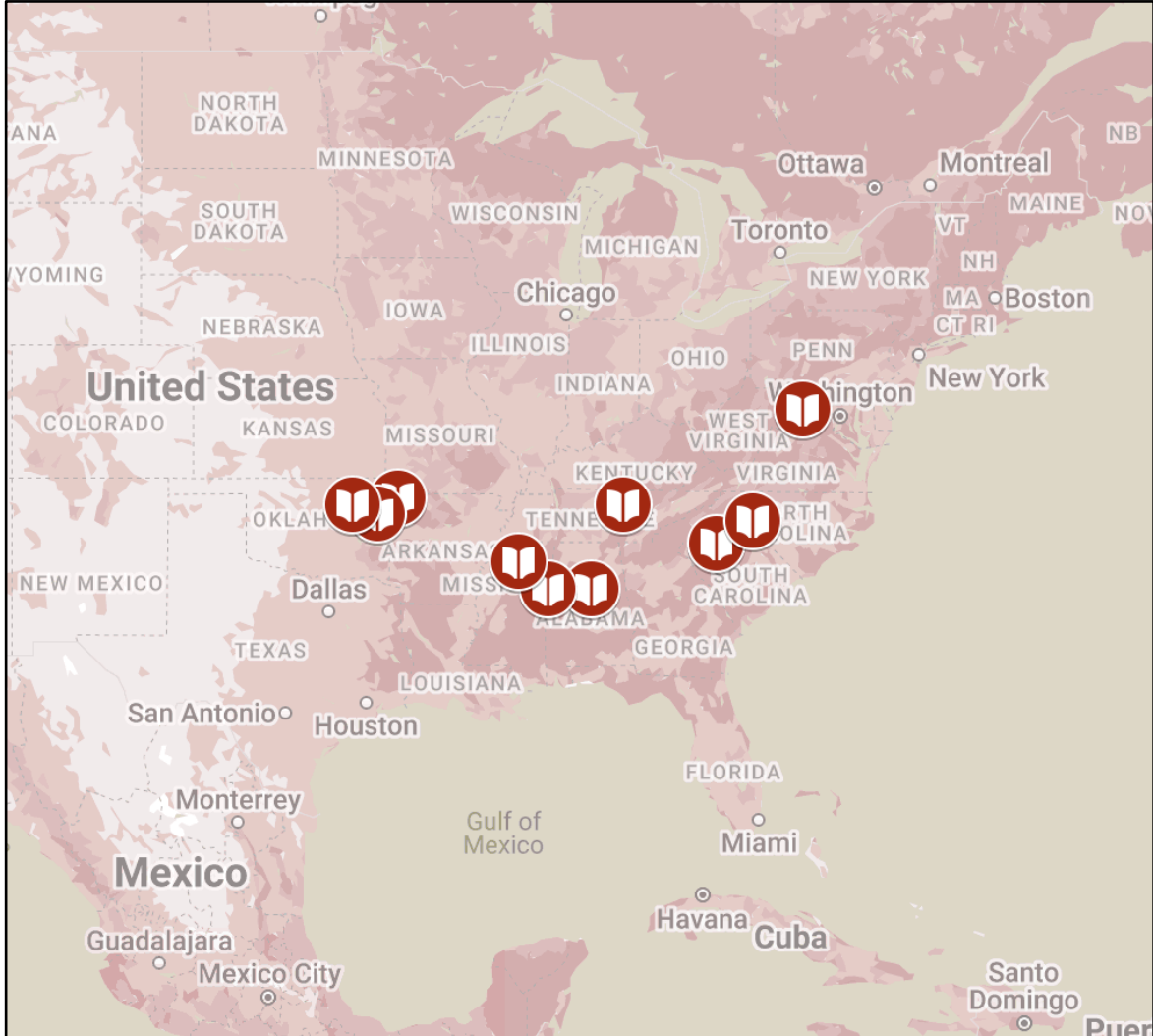


# Finding Hope in Turbulent Times: E-Cards from the Road

*Sister Simone Campbell*



*July 22*

Charlotte, NC

Over the next two weeks, I (Sr. Simone Campbell) am traveling through the south going to bookstores to have conversations about the reality in the local situation and seeking to understand what their lived experience is like and where people find hope. Most evenings (or mornings) I'm going to send "electronic postcards" (email and a picture attachment) about what I have discovered. I hope it will provide us all with some new information about the reality in a part of the country that I don't know that much about. Hopefully it expands our understanding.

Between now and August 3 I will be at: Salisbury NC, Spartanburg SC, Cookeville TN, Birmingham AL, Columbus MS, Oxford, MS, Bentonville AR, Tahlequah OK, Tulsa OK.

But yesterday afternoon I got started with a visit with a friend who lives in a suburb of Charlotte. She and her husband have two small (adorable) boys. She told me that for her it is very scary to talk about politics with anyone. She has seen at least one neighbor with an AK-47 and worries about "volatility." She doesn't want to know if her neighbors support Trump because it would create rifts between them, but she feels that part of her life is on a desert island. It was her perspective that even if only progressive folks come to these events it is really important for people to have a safe place to talk. She doesn't feel that exists for her and she stays silent. What a challenge.

In Charlotte the car rental company gave me a not to be missed orange Ford (see attached). I should be seen (and safe) on the road. I'm excited about learning and hope that you will be too. So "come along" or at least enjoy these electronic postcards. Hope I get the technology down. Thanks for your interest!



*Sister Simone's rental car*

*July 23*

**South Main Book Company**

Salisbury, NC

Two pictures of my day...started at Caldwell Presbyterian Church with long time friend Jan Valder Offerman. Great interracial welcoming congregation and a chance to talk about my trip through the south. Wonderful sharing friendship and a commitment to bridging divides.

Then late afternoon (5 p.m.) I had the first conversation at a bookstore. We met at the South Main Book Company in Salisbury, North Carolina about 40 miles north of Charlotte. We had 14 folks present for the conversation including the local editor of the town paper. It turned out that they described themselves as more progressive than their neighbors and finding a hub in the bookstore for connections. They also said that they found themselves in community with their more conservative neighbors because they share the ordinary things of life (like gardening).

However, once they start talking about things like Confederate flags, guns and sexual identity the relationships fray. The group gathered were more seniors, some workers and one millennial. As they talked about the tension generated by the confederate flag and civil war confederate monuments, it reflected the identity that some have historically with their place in the community. (One of our participants family have been in the immediate area since the 1780's). This led to a question: would the millennials care about confederate symbols if they don't care now. We took this as a hope for the future of not being so divided.

The one big thunderbolt for me was the comment that if I really wanted to see difference then I needed to go to a gun show!! I have to confess that it took my breath away! But I think that means its true. So next weekend I'm going to look for a gun show...stay tuned.

This is the update from day 1 of this exciting adventure...

*July 24*

**Hub City Bookshop**

Spartanburg, SC

Here I am weary but grateful after another bookstore event. We were at "Hub City Books." For me, the best comment was made to me privately as I was doing book signings. One woman said that she came expecting to listen to a Catholic Sister talk about hope, but what she experienced was that I facilitated a conversation in which the 14 participants found where they had hope! Isn't that the best!!!!

Anyway, what I learned was that Hub City (Spartanburg) is called that because it was a railroad hub. It was highly involved in the textile industry until it collapsed and decimated the economy. Folks said that a creative mayor finally came in and restarted the economy through the colleges and universities in town as well as making creative centers for arts and computers.

We had a couple of high school teachers who talked about the censorship and how their students want to read all the censored books. It appears that those campaigning for this censorship really have not read the books but only read and feared the critiques.

Another common denominator in Spartanburg had been “What Church do you go to?” However it was noted that those below 40 are less likely to belong to a church and those over 40 find it a significant and supportive community.

One of the political problems is that only those who have wealth or another income can afford to be a State representative because the legislature is paid a pittance and is in session for only 3 or 4 months a year.

I’m weary...best I stop here. On to Cookeville TN tomorrow.



*Conversation at Hub City Bookshop in Spartanburg*

*July 25*

## **Plenty Bookshop**

Cookeville, TN

Last night I was too weary to write a postcard...so this early morning greeting. We met in Cookeville Tennessee at the "Plenty" bookstore. Cookeville is a town of about 30,000 people and has a University and a respected hospital. We started with the account of a tornado 3 years ago that destroyed part of the city and how people of the town came together to help each other out. People found things blown all over the area and returned them to a central location to be claimed. While it was clearly traumatic that people lost everything, the part they are holding on to is that people came out to help in generous and amazing ways.

One of the men said that everything is up to the town and their county. There is not a strong state government and they don't pay much in taxes so there is more reliance on the local community to show up. This seems to be a good thing on many levels until they started talking about healthcare...or the lack of it. There are months long waiting lines for "emergency" services.

Another concern they had was "outside agitators" (Proud Boys? or Klan?) came and were protesting a gay pride event the town had recently. These outsiders were described as a hate group and the folks in our group didn't want their children at the event with a "hate group" because it taught the children to hate back. There was a concern that the media reported it as the "Cookeville agitators" when they were actually from outside. After the gathering the pastor of a local church said quietly to me that the disrupters were not all outsiders and that in the "mega-churches" there is a breeding ground for white nationalism. The pastor said that he had not felt free to bring it up in the group because he didn't know where people stood in the group, but he wanted me to know.

In a piece of candor, one of the participants described herself as a blue dot in a sea of red.

This was the most politically diverse group. It was clear that their commitment and engagement at the local level provides good answers for their town. They said that it was not true for the other towns/counties around. They benefit from the fact that the town and the county are really a single unit and don't fight each other. They also benefit from the university and the BIG arts scene.

What a mix of perspectives and insights. Now on to Birmingham.

*July 26*

Birmingham, AL

Yesterday was a wonderful day of learning as I worked my way from Tennessee to Birmingham Alabama, with a stop in Huntsville.

I visited a friend in Huntsville who I got to know when she worked in DC in the faith advocacy community. We met for lunch for a “blue plate special!” It is “meat and 3.” I had chicken and dumplings as my meat and then mac and cheese, green beans and banana pudding! I needed to walk to Birmingham after all that, but alas just sat in the car. I found out that Huntsville is changing dramatically as 440 new people are moving in every day! The space industry and tech work is the draw for this explosion in the population. I can tell you that corn and cotton fields all around are spouting houses! We wondered how this might change the culture of Huntsville.

Then at Thank You Books last night we had a GREAT turn out for our conversation. There were about 25 folks all engaged in the conversation. Two Sisters came wearing their Nuns on the Bus t-shirts from when we were here on the bus in 2013! The three of us reminisced about that night and the great conversation we had about immigration reform!! The crowd was so large it didn’t fit into the center and we had to do it out in the parking lot and a hot steamy evening. But it was a memorable event.

Birmingham is a progressive hub in Alabama and is represented in Congress by a Democrat. (One woman had moved with her family from Syracuse NY and her friends were worried that she was moving to the south. But she told us in Syracuse she was represented by a Republican and here in the South she is represented by a Democrat!). So the conversation was much more “blue” than other conversations that I’ve had on the road.

There were many interesting observations and concerns...The group talked about the culture of nice-ness and one man reflected that he thought it might go back to plantation days and the covering over what they felt bad and/or embarrassed about. This led to a discussion of patriarchy and the expectation that of who leads, but there is also the expectation that you will know another’s family. One member said that her family goes back 9 generations in Alabama, a man had “only 7 generations.” But this deep-rooted fidelity makes change difficult.

There was widespread concern that before politics influenced the Church. Now the reality is that the fundamentalist Christian Nationalists are influencing politics. These folks did not talk about January 6 or anything negative over the past years. This makes it very difficult to have conversations about change.

In the beginning of the conversation the group made clear that they are working on the issues of racism and are challenged by the continuing work. It is important work in the south, but it is important work everywhere. They underscored for me how all of us need to be engaged in breaking down the historic barriers and connecting across lines of all kinds. This underscored for me the importance of this trip...may we all learn more!!

Today is a day off as I meander to Columbus, MS. There might not be a postcard tomorrow...we'll see.

*July 27*

### **Thank You Bookshop** Birmingham, AL

I didn't think that I would have a postcard today because yesterday was my "day off." However I failed to include pictures from our great Birmingham conversation so I needed to do that. We were at Thank You Bookshop. You can see a group shot of the 22 folks who gathered. The second is of Sr. Jackie and Sr Mary who wore their Nuns on the Bus t-shirts from when the bus was here in 2013 and finally is a picture with the store owner Kristen Iskenderian (whose younger daughter is named Simone).

But the bigger reason that I'm writing is that I went to the Legacy Museum in Montgomery (adding way more driving time than I imagined to the trip to Columbus, but that is another story). [Legacy Museum](#) It is powerful, provocative, sensitively portrayed with staff to talk to is you want and a place of silence/singing/healing to absorb the reality. It is a MUST see. I had seen the earlier museum but not the completed powerful big building with holograms that talk to you and immersive experiences. Words really fail to describe it. BUT a few facts that stunned me...Massachusetts was the first of the colonies to approve slavery. All of the colonies were involved in the slave trade. After the Civil War, Alabama started incarcerating lots of African Americans and leasing them out to plantations and factories in a new form of slavery. By 1893, 73% of the State of Alabama's revenue came from leasing prisoners.

One quote that got me: November 1868: Tennessee became the first former Confederate State to replace their biracial Reconstruction Government with and all white "Redeemer" Government opposed to Black civil rights.

This quote showed how faith language entered into the white domination...

So much to learn and a future to change.



Conversation at Thank You Bookshop in Birmingham



*July 28*

## **Friendly City Books**

Columbus, MS

What a lovely hot, humid day to be in Mississippi. Columbus is a small town. I was quite surprised driving down 7<sup>th</sup> street S to get to the downtown there was every kind of house imaginable: One ante-bellum mansion, apartments, small ranch houses and old dilapidated wood houses. They are all right next to each other and not the way that zoning and redlining has created things in the north. Then I remembered a comment from Birmingham that some Black neighborhoods are completely surrounded by White neighborhoods...but there is only one way into the Black neighborhood so neither race sees each other.

20 of us (including me) gathered at Friendly City Books in downtown Columbus. We had the mayor, teachers, pastor, a reporter, two college students and a variety of other folks for a wonderful conversation. People thought that the divisions exist between north and south because we don't know each other. In the South the first questions to ask are: Who are your kin? What Church do you go to? If you don't have a Church yet, please come to mine! Apparently there is a bit of a competitive spirit for recruiting church members.

But on the side I heard a bit of pain about the splitting of the Methodists and how the majority of the congregation went one way and their leadership/clergy went another. It seemed to be painful for all. Then in the conversation there was a reference to the Presbyterian split 50 years ago (but still fresh).

The train tracks literally divide the community between white and black. But some of the newer parts (North Haven Woods) is more integrated. But the public schools still suffer with white children going to "segregation academies" to avoid integration. These academies think they are better because they are all white, but the teachers pointed out the reality that is VERY different. The public school education is quite good.

I have to point out one, Chuck Yarborough, who teaches history at Mississippi School of Math and Science. The student body of Juniors and Seniors is mixed racially and he has the students do primary document research about individuals (black and white) from the past. The students research, write and then perform as the character they are studying warts and all. At our meeting this teacher got applause for helping to lessen the racial division by doing performances of these works by students on May 8 (emancipation day in this area). They perform African American and White lives and stories. The people in the group says everyone wants to go to the May 8<sup>th</sup> presentation and everyone comes away having learned something.

The teachers and our 2 college students talked about how the joy had gone out of learning because of having to teach to the test. But one of the young people (now a

medical student) loved that she could do dual enrollment in high school and college. There was also talk about “black flight” so families can get their kids into the better schools in the area.

Best I end here...sooo much to learn. Attached is a picture of the historical marker downtown. It is a new marker, but I couldn't find the church. A bit confusing.

*July 29*

## **Square Books**

Oxford, MS

Let me start with the car drama of my time in Oxford. As I was pulling into the parking lot in Oxford, MS, I noticed that the tire pressure light was on. I looked around and saw that the rear tire on the passenger side was low. Hmmm. Have to deal with it after the event. I checked next door to the parking structure and there was an air pump in the gas station that you paid for with a credit card...perfect. Except when I came out of the event the tire was COMPLETELY flat. That is when southern hospitality kicked in. A family had invited me to come to their house for their Saturday night pizza gathering. That meant that I had some folks with me to show me the way. Everyone had helpful suggestions. One got his wife to bring his battery-operated air pump but the tire didn't hold air. One got some police/parking guys to come change the tire, but there wasn't the lug nut wrench. I called the Hertz people at 6 p.m. and they sent a request for help (that was finally answered at 9:30 when I called back). I have to confess that it all made me a nervous wreck because I had the longest drive of this trip the next day to Bentonville. A police officer gave me a ride to my hotel and when the man was coming to fix the tire I got an Uber to the structure...But the upshot of it was that the tire was “shredded” and I was SOOO lucky that it had not disintegrated on the highway. I had to drive on one of those smaller tires to the Memphis airport and exchange the car. So my bright orange car is now is turquoise blue. The hardest part for me was how rattled it made me about getting to Bentonville on time...which did all work out. BUT it made it so that my email about Oxford is delayed until now.

Oxford is the home of Ol' Miss University. As one person said at the gathering “Ol' Miss owns the town!” A concern is that alums have bought second homes in Oxford so that they can come to games and University functions. It isn't just football either. Their team also won the baseball championship! I also learned about “Greek life” in the stores on the central square. The people at the conversation told me about how they are working to “clarify” their past by acknowledging the reality of slavery and its continuing consequences. They pointed out that Mississippi only has 3 million people in the whole state. There is a continuing “brain drain” because there is no economy that can keep people in the state.

They noted that they have a 7% tax on grocery store food and a 9% tax on prepared food. The governor justifies this because low-income people get SNAP benefits so the government is only paying the government (not recognizing that SNAP doesn't cover all of the cost of food). They also said that the plan is to do away with all personal income tax even though they do have a couple of billionaires in the state. This means that low-income people will pay more in state tax through food than the billionaires.

Mississippi also has not expanded Medicaid for low-income people. I tried to understand why. It seems that in addition to the reaction to "Obama," there is a negative reaction to anything federal. On the drive I was thinking about this and realized that Mississippi is still focusing on their version of the Civil War: states' rights. This backwards looking means that they keep fighting the past without creating a future.

One of the things that people are working on is getting historic markers that tell the truth. They have one at the courthouse where the last lynching took place. The folks at the conversation were proud of this one. Then there are the 2 attached. One is easier to read than the other but both surprised me because of the clear reference to the destruction of the civil war. The people at the gathering hope that the truth telling might help Mississippi move ahead. SOOOO interesting. But enough for now.



*A historical marker in Oxford*

*July 30*

## **Two Friends Books**

Bentonville, AK

Luckily today was a real day off! I stayed in Bentonville today in order to see the art museum Chrystal Bridges and have a little down time. Went to the museum this morning, had lunch, explored Bentonville (which is totally under BIG construction everywhere) and came back to the hotel and took a 2 hour nap!! Now I feel refreshed and need to get this Postcard out.

Yesterday at Two Friends Books (photo of 2 friends who are the owners Rachel & Monica—other Photo bookstore with wine! What a thought!!) we had a great conversation. In Mississippi some folks had said that Bentonville and Arkansas isn't the south and I was cheating by going there. So I started with my usual intro and then asked if they considered themselves the south. The response was that they were the South but marketing is trying to change the name to the "Mid-South." Apparently it can be difficult for Walmart to recruit top notch people to come live here so they are trying to change the city to be "top notch" rather than move to an existing city.

In the conversation it was pointed out that they are becoming less southern. They do not hear the question: Who are your people? What church to you attend? In fact, it was admitted that one participant doesn't know if any of her friends go to Church.

Those who grew up here or have been here for a long time miss the smallness of being a 9000-person town and is now a city of 53,000 people. They noted that 15 years ago there was a big rally of the Ku Klux Klan in the town square that has now been beautified and the confederate statue removed to the Confederate Cemetery. It is not acceptable now to have the Klan in such visibility, but the attitudes still exist but are diluted by the bigger population.

It isn't just Walmart and the Waltons. Tysons foods has a BIG chicken processing plant in Springdale (neighboring town) and a large Hispanic population that works there. The Waltons also insisted that its suppliers (even overseas companies) have offices in the area. This has created a greater diversity of people.

So we decided that Bentonville and area is South-ish. Money/wealth of the key leaders is more important than government. If you want to do something in Bentonville you have to convince a Walton to sponsor it. So Northwest Arkansas may be an island that while "in the South" has been very diluted. But people don't complain because it is the economic boom that has made a different standard of living possible. One of the participants said that if I come back in 5 years it is going to be a different place with a LOT of ecological building being done for the new Walmart world headquarters and a LOT of other projects.

But as I have been thinking about the community of hope, the first key ingredient is a “long and available memory.” This is the first place in the south where this has been sorely lacking. Those who have lived here a long time can’t find their childhood landmarks and those who are new comers don’t know what to look for. This is an entirely different sort of experience.

Last point...went to the art museum Chrystal Bridges. BEAUTIFUL building and art, but found it ironic that the featured exhibit was of Diego Rivera and his championing of the workers. hmmm.



*Two Friends Books co-founders Rachel Slaton and Monica Diodati*

*August 1*

## **Too Fond of Books**

Tahlequah, OK

I continue to savor the comments and the learning from Tahlequah. I am struck by how different parts of the state have different characteristics—and I had just grouped the state all together in the generic south. Tahlequah is the capital of the Cherokee nation and there is a lot of investment in tribal governance and healthcare. I was amazed at the medical facility that has been built for the tribe AND they are offering medical education here for members and non-members of the tribe.

I was also struck by having a college that is part of the Oklahoma state system. This creates a different population with professors and students in and around the town.

But the history is very complicated. I learned some of that complexity of slavery and discrimination with the reality that the Cherokee had slaves and moved in the “trail of tears” with their slaves to Oklahoma. SOOO complicated as an oppressed people were also oppressors. Now it seems that the African Americans in the area are few and live in smaller communities. There are few in Tahlequah itself.

As I reflected on the conversation I was struck by the economic reality (jealousy?) of tribes and the state of Oklahoma. It seems that once the tribe got its sovereignty back in the late 1970’s they began to prosper. This has made state government a little jealous and created tension between the current governor and the tribe. BUT the tribe has been very generous in giving money to local school districts. This has been invaluable for the districts in challenging times.

There are a variety of internet providers in the area, BUT the local cooperative is the best. However they only serve one side of the street in downtown. The bookstore is on the “other side of the street” and has poor and unreliable service. This was much more like the information that we got when we did the rural roundtables back in 2019. The varied impact of internet access and the various companies involved really makes for a complicated reality in a town.

Also pondering that there are few blacks in the Ozarks...and that the Ozarks are more a continuation of Appalachia.

Finally—I was struck by the capacity to connect on beauty! Beauty of the rivers, lakes and fields. Maybe our effort is to stand shoulder to shoulder and ask “what beauty do you see?” ...and a confession: I had not expected beauty in Oklahoma! And I was wrong. How important to travel and learn.

## IN TURBULENT TIMES: Presidential Medal Of Freedom recipient talks hope with Tahlequah residents

By Sara Serrano | [sserrano@tahlequahdailypress.com](mailto:sserrano@tahlequahdailypress.com)

Aug 2, 2023



*Sister Simone's visit to Too Fond of Books made the front page of the Tahlequah Daily Press ([see it here!](#))*

*August 2*

### **Magic City Books**

Tulsa OK

Friends on this postcard list...thanks for journeying with me. I am sitting in the Tulsa airport as dawn and sunrise spreads across the flat terrain. I'm pondering a trip rich in connections, learning and mystery!

But let me end with my experience in Tulsa. It was a little different in that I did two events with Magic City Books. I did a dialogue on Tuesday at Magic City Books and then a big event (with a few hundred people) at the Unitarian's church that was also

sponsored by Magic City Books. And in between I explored the reality of Greenwood and the massacre in 1921 and the impact of urban renewal. It was noted that Greenwood thrived because of oil and segregation. There was an insular economy that had access to wealth in oil on their land. The community rebuilt after the massacre but urban renewal wiped them out again when the freeway was built through their community. (Like the experience in Oakland, CA and many other places.)

Thanks to a friend of a friend, I went to a gathering at the Dennis R. Neill Equality Center and learned of the work in the LGBTQ community and how the current stress is making their work more needed than ever. I learned of the importance of private philanthropy (George Kaiser Foundation in particular) to get anything done. Oil wealth is the center of wealth in Oklahoma and people rely on philanthropy to do work that in other parts of the country would be done by government service. Specifically, it was said that without Jewish philanthropy Tulsa would be nothing. I also learned that historically Oklahoma had the most black run towns than any other state.

Tulsa was in the midst of a special election and the woman in charge of the administration of the election was there and talked about the stress of the past few years. They have sheriffs in the office “looking over their shoulders.” This is especially difficult when the sheriffs don’t know the rules for elections and the workers are doing administrative tasks yet there are people with guns standing by their desks.

I learned that in the 1920’s and ‘30’s the Osage tribe was the wealthiest people in the world!! This was because of oil...BUT then white men started marrying into the tribe and killing their wives and taking their inheritance! The horror of this story I can’t even imagine. Folks said that there is a movie coming out on this called Killers of the Flower Moon. It will be good to tell the story, but I don’t know if I have the stomach to see it.

Oh so much to say...one woman said that Tulsa was more progressive than all of Oklahoma...it is a bubble but with its struggles. But now there is an effort to dismantle the public schools at the state level. Folks don’t understand the motivation of the politicians but they are trying to challenge it. They are working against white supremacy and under informed voters! What a challenge.

So in this South-ish Plains-ish city there are similarities to the Southern states and yet a wealth that is unheard of in Mississippi and Alabama. It is a complex history with the Native Tribes and the history of Slavery. Oklahoma only became a state in 1907 so all of the States rights struggles are still “young.” What mystery...so much to learn.



*August 3*

Denver, CO

Greetings from the Denver Airport as I work my way home to DC.

Thank you for receiving my postcards during this 2-week trip through the south and “near south.” I have learned so much in the journey. From Salisbury North Carolina through Tulsa Oklahoma the welcome of the people all along the way has been stunning.

I learned a bit of the complex history of slavery and the echoes of that sin today. Oklahoma was the perfect place to end because its history was really the wild west where Indian tribes, Black families and White settlers all could get amazingly rich in this rather challenging climate. The reality of oil and the oil boom created great wealth...and great jealousy.

I also learned that in every place I went there were people who hungered and hoped for a society that cared more for each other. But I also learned in Cookeville that the generosity of individuals in responding to need is an amazing tribute to southern concern. BUT there is a limit to this generosity when the need is for medical skill and specialized training. The lack of a government structure for this technical medical service is leaving a lot of people out of care. The solution is not either individual response OR government response. We need to find a way to balance both and effectively care for our communities with personal and effective concern.

I learned in Mississippi how the results of the Civil War still echo in the state. There is still a reconciling with the past that has not been effectively completed. This creates a seemingly knee-jerk negative reaction to “federal programs” as being an extension of the “war of northern aggression!” Hence the refusal to expand Medicaid and embrace other national programs. It wasn’t said directly, but this resistance really felt like an extension of the battles. So much of the important work being done in the state is about publicly telling the truth about slavery, economic oppression and the civil war. This includes understanding how the North benefitted from slavery and is NOT an example the “clean hands” righteousness.

Then there is the antithesis of Mississippi in Bentonville where the whole city is being made new in order to attract talent and business to support Walmart, Tysons, JB Hunt and their allied organizations. However, in the process they are losing the touchstones of their history. It felt a bit like a “Disneyland town.” All new facades and the question of what is behind it.

Then in Oklahoma I learned that it wasn’t the South and has its own unique history that needs to be understood. The Cherokee and the “5 Civilized Tribes” forcibly moved to

Oklahoma is a separate reality. The fact that the Cherokee had slaves and fought for the Confederacy complicates the story. In Oklahoma, I felt that all of the threads of this trip got pulled together into a rugged and rough story of oil wealth and struggling poverty as well as individualism and shared concern.

I have seen how their long and available memory gives perspective and can ground them in creating the future. Many touch the pain of their world and engage in responding. The challenge to talk across generations and cultures is a struggle in most places where there is a challenging exodus of young people. But everywhere I went there was a continued commitment to engaging in some fashion to improve their community. We need eyes to see and share their hope. In the end...maybe...that is the import of this trip...sharing hope in turbulent times helps me not to leave people out of my care. Is this the renewal that our nation needs? Maybe?

Thanks for sharing this journey with me. I still am not sure what all of this will turn into, but I am VERY grateful for new insights and understanding of the southern part of our nation. Our shared history and our visions for our shared future are often in conflict, but some understanding might help us move together as a nation. There are complex struggles that I'm only beginning to understand. But I can say that everywhere that I went there are people of good will who do share hope in turbulent times.

## Appendix

*June 17*

### **WordPlay Bookshop (“test case” for tour)**

Wardensville, WV

They have a co-op utility that has allowed them to get fiberoptic cable through the Department of Agriculture. This co-op stems from the 1930's and rural electrification. They won a federal lottery through the Department of Agriculture that allowed them to get ½ grant and ½ loan. There is \$36 billion in this program nationally for “Rural Electric Companies.” The sidewalks came in because of the 1% of the sales tax that goes to public safety. Early on they did ADA compliance but recently the state came in and put in improved sidewalks. However the orange strips in the curb cuts are deteriorating already and they are trying to get the state to come back and fix them. They used to have river stone in the cuts that created the same “rumble” effect but were long lasting. They want that replaced.

The participants acknowledged that they were not the long term “natives.” Many have come here for retirement or weekends because they grew up in small towns and liked the pace and beauty of the small towns and the neighbor to neighbor approach. The mayor Betsy was there and spoke of the work together ethos. There was a town council member who moved down from Philly and ended up getting involved in the mowing of city property and then got certified for water and sewer.

They have a first Friday business gathering for businesses to meet each other and be supportive. The town only has 300 people but some of the participants came from other towns near by.

One woman grew up in small town Alabama and she brought her family. She misses the small town connection and finds the familiar in this area.

It was noted that the “welcoming spirit” did not include race. However, there is more of a welcoming spirit for gays, which some find surprising. But then it was mentioned that every family has someone who is gay. This welcome is good as long as folks are not too “flamboyant.” So this welcome to gays is a quiet welcome.

There is a BIG need for affordable housing. The closest city is Warfield (?) or Mayfield (?). There is a chicken processing plant there. There are immigrants from all over the world working in the plant. But housing is such an issue that the company is building 156 unit apartment complex for their workers. It is also a problem that the low income folks don't have cars so they have to live close to the plan and to shopping.

Some of the folks just come down on the weekend when they can. One challenge is that out of town there is a lack of infrastructure. The co-op is trying to find a way to get into other counties but this has not been possible so far.

There is a lot of fear among the “real locals” who were not represented in this group. There is a sense of protection of traditions. One man told of coming to get accepted into a “family” in a holler after helping a buddy who had a massive heart attack. The family in the holler then introduced him and vouched for him with others in that same area.



Conversation at WordPlay Bookshop in Wardensville

## Hope in Turbulent Times Tour Pitch Content

*Sister Simone Campbell is a Presidential Medal of Freedom winner who you might know from her work with [Nuns on the Bus](#). In July, she’s traveling across the Deep South to host a series of conversations - hoping to listen and learn from people about what brings them together and gives them hope.*

*Simone takes the stories she gathers and uses them to open up audiences to hear other perspectives - as she puts it, “softening hearts and opening minds to a more complex reality”. She’s a fascinating thinker, and definitely a rare character in her ability to do this work - and genuinely get people talking and sharing of themselves.*

**Basic Polarization/Democracy:** *We think this work is really informative for those exploring polarization and democracy issues in our country, especially ahead of 2024.*

*Sister Simone has a unique approach to this topic - seeking to listen and learn, not to convert, in an effort to build back our democracy. For readers who are interested in how to heal our divides, Sister Simone is an instructive example and we think they'll be intrigued by her unique profile and approach to healing.*

**Hope:** *We're calling the conversations "Hope in Turbulent Times" because that's what Sister Simone is trying to discover - what gives people hope in an era defined by a lot of anxiety? Especially in these places - which tend to only pop onto the national scene when things are going terribly - what is lifting people up? And where will Sister Simone find common ground with folks she meets along the way, who may have very different experiences and backgrounds than hers?*

*SKB: Maybe a short bit of research about hope (physiological, psychological, spiritual - how it doesn't leave the human condition but is a part of it. Simone is on a journey to discover that part of the human condition.)*

**The Other:** *Sister Simone's career has been focused on caring for the marginalized; this tour is a unique extension of that, focused on the "political other" - folks in "red states" too often left out of the national dialogue. We think this is a really unique opportunity to hear from these people through an adept interlocutor - Sister Simone has led community conversations like this before in rural areas and consistently comes across thought provoking, meaningful individuals with stories that we think are worth exploring and sharing.*

**Boomers:** *We think Sister Simone is a compelling example for her generation - stepping up rather than stepping back in their "retirement" years. Baby Boomers have been in charge for a long time, and during those years, we've drifted more into our partisan polarized camps - Sister Simone's work is a genuine attempt at finding common ground, empathy, and the path toward bringing people back to a place of understanding.*

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*If you'd be interested in talking more with Simone or joining one of the conversations, we'd love to connect you. The schedule of conversations is below.*

- *July 23: Salisbury, NC*
- *July 24: Spartanburg, SC*
- *July 25: Cookeville, TN*
- *July 26: Birmingham, AL*
- *July 28: Columbus, MS*
- *July 29: Oxford, MS*

- July 30: Bentonville, AR
- August 1: Tahlequah, OK
- August 2: Tulsa, OK

### **Sister Simone Bio**

*Sister Simone Campbell (Roman Catholic Sister of Social Service) is a religious leader, attorney, author and recipient of a 2022 Presidential Medal of Freedom (the United States' highest civilian honor). She has extensive experience in public policy rooted in the lived experiences of people at the economic margins of society. Now she is an Emerson Elder with the Emerson Collective and co-leads "Understanding US" focused on political healing. For 17 years she was executive director of NETWORK, Lobby for Catholic Social Justice and leader of Nuns on the Bus. Her healthcare policy work was seminal in passage of the Affordable Care Act. She has received numerous awards including the "Defender of Democracy Award" from the Parliamentarians for Global Action. Prior to Washington, this native Californian did state advocacy and for 18 years was the founder of the Oakland Community Law Center. In 1995 she was elected the leader of her community the Sisters of Social Service and served in that capacity until 2000. She wrote two award winning books are A Nun on the Bus (2014) and Hunger for Hope (2020).*

