

Marriage and Other Committed Relationships*

Introduction

Marriage has always been regarded by Friends as a religious commitment, not a civil contract. George Fox said, "Marriage is the work of the Lord, only." It is an awe-inspiring, lifetime commitment between a couple and God, without need for priest or magistrate. Quaker marriage is a testament to that belief. The marriage ceremony is a meeting for worship during which the couple reverently speaks simple vows in the presence of the Spirit and those who prayerfully sustain them in undertaking their commitment.

From the very early days, the Religious Society of Friends stressed the need for serious consideration prior to marriage, the clearness of those wishing to marry from all other engagements, the public announcement of the intention to marry, and the significance of the meeting for worship in which the declarations were made. The couple was held to high standards of love, fidelity, and discipline, bearing witness to the presence of the Spirit between them.

Our practice today must attest to the same high standards for our committed relationships. Although the standards for marriage remain essentially the same as they were among early Friends, the cultural and social contexts in which we live have changed dramatically. We joyfully acknowledge the sustaining, enriching presence of loving unions among us, and we want the meeting's strength to reinforce these commitments.

We intend, through the care and ministrations of our meetings, that strong, resilient marriages and other committed relationships will flourish. We are encouraged to

grow in both our virtue and our capacity to love by the testing, against the world and each other, of those weaknesses which by the grace of God we can convert into strengths, and by the finding of those strengths and beauties in each other which we hardly dared suspect were there. But these are the rewards of unfolding years; years, not weeks or months. The glory of a great marriage lies in the surprises which loving support, acceptance, and graceful forgiveness can bring forth..

R. B. Crowell, "Words at a Quaker Wedding," Friends Journal, 11/74

Relationships Under the Care of the Meeting

Before taking the couple under its care, a meeting, through a clearness committee, counsels with the partners, seeking to discern their clearness about what they are undertaking. If the committee so recommends, and the meeting agrees, the couple is taken under its care. This can be understood as an affirmation that a loving community stands ready to take action as necessary to support the well-being of the two partners, of the relationship itself, and of any children who may be, or may become, involved.

Monthly meetings within Intermountain Yearly Meeting vary in their concept of marriage and acceptance of same-sex unions. A few are able to find clearness to oversee only heterosexual relationships; many find clearness to oversee both same-sex and heterosexual unions. In both situations, it is the strength and quality of the loving spirit between two people that concerns the meeting.

Request to the Meeting

When two people wish to have their relationship taken under the care of the monthly meeting, they write a letter to the clerk of that meeting stating their intention and requesting that the meeting begin the clearness process. In the good order of Friends, a period of at least three months is usually needed between the sending of the request and the date of the marriage. It is expected that at least one of the partners be a member or regular attender of the meeting. If one of the partners holds membership in another monthly meeting, a letter of clearness or release should be obtained from that meeting.

In cases where the individuals are neither members of the Religious Society of Friends nor regular attenders at meeting for worship, the meeting may choose to assist the couple in having a celebration of marriage or other committed relationship after the manner of Friends. This could include having a clearness committee and/or an arrangements committee, but this relationship would not be considered to be under the care of the meeting.

Clearness Committee

When a request for oversight of a couple's relationship is received, a clearness committee is appointed by the monthly meeting or by its Committee on Oversight. It is important that members of the clearness committee be willing to devote the time necessary to give prayerful consideration to the right course of action and be amenable to providing counsel in the future. Clearness committees often meet more than once. The committee members should be well grounded in Friends' practice.

The couple and the clearness committee meet in thoughtful and prayerful discussion to seek clarity about God's will regarding the proposed union. Specific queries or topics may be presented by the committee or the couple to give direction to the discussion, or discussion may arise out of worship. It is important that those participating in the clearness process approach each meeting with open hearts and minds, that sufficient time be allotted for thorough understanding and seasoning, and that any encumbrance be explored to ensure that both persons are free of conflicting obligations. Thoroughness in the clearness process can be valuable to the couple in helping them examine the strength of their commitment to a lifelong relationship with each other.

Because practices differ from state to state, it is especially important that both the committee and the couple recognize and understand the laws, statutes, and regulations regarding marriage in their state so that the legal standing of their relationship will be clear. After meeting with the couple, the clearness committee meets separately to share their impressions or concerns about the proposed union.

Topics Suggested for Discussion During the Clearness Process

The topics listed below tend to arise naturally in the course of clearness committee meetings. It is preferable that prospective partners broach them themselves; it is also well for the committee to have topics in mind and to see that they are covered.

1. *Background and Acquaintance.* How well acquainted are the partners? What are their common values? How do they adapt to differences between them in background, religion, temperament, and interests? Can they react to their differences with humor, mutual respect, patience, and generosity?
2. *Religious Beliefs, Feelings, Aspirations.* Do they see commitment or marriage as a spiritual relationship? How do they propose to meet their religious needs? Does each seek to understand and honor the religious beliefs of the other?
3. *Growth and Fulfillment.* Do they think of themselves as trusted and equal lifelong partners, sharing responsibilities and decisions? Are they supportive of each other's goals for personal growth and fulfillment?
4. *Daily Living.* Have they considered how they will deal with issues and problems, which are bound to arise during the course of the marriage? Are they able to talk with each other about their sexual expectations? Have they discussed and worked through questions regarding the use and management of money? Have they considered ways to resolve anger when it arises within the relationship? Have they thought about differing needs for time alone as opposed to time together? Have they explored their attitudes towards holidays and gift giving? Have they discussed the surname each will use? Are they prepared to seek creative means of resolution when their problems seem insoluble?
5. *Relationships with Others.* Have they considered whether they desire children—the problems as well as the joys children would bring, and the responsibilities for nurturing and guiding them? How do they view their relationships with each other's families and their obligations toward society? How will already-existing relationships be treated: with ex-spouses and children, old friends, ex-parents-in-law, ex-grandparents-in-law? Are they prepared to honor that of God in all of these relationships?
6. *Relationship with the Monthly Meeting.* How do the partners expect the monthly meeting to support their relationship? What do they expect their relationship to bring to the monthly meeting?
7. *Discharge of Prior Commitments.* Do they have personal or financial obligations that need to be met or discharged? Are they aware of each other's financial obligations, and have they discussed and reached agreement on how these would be met during the relationship? Are they aware of the need for changing names on documents, creating new wills, and making other arrangements for existing legal documents to reflect the new relationship?
8. *Attitudes of Others.* What are the views of their families and friends toward the prospective marriage or commitment? Are there ways the meeting can help the couple deal with these views?

9. *The Celebration.* Is the couple acquainted with and accepting of the form and implications of the Quaker celebration of marriage? Do they wish to join themselves in a religious commitment to a lifetime together? Do they welcome the oversight and support of the meeting community? It may be that unity in reaching clearness to move forward is not readily found. The committee and the couple may choose to continue seeking clarity about God's will in this matter, or they may choose to lay aside the request for a while or permanently.

When the couple and the committee are clear that the celebration or wedding should go forward, the clearness committee reports either to the Oversight Committee or directly to the monthly meeting for business, giving its recommendation and asking for the approval of the monthly meeting. Some monthly meetings choose to hold such matters over for a period of time, for seasoning. Once the request has been approved, the monthly meeting (or its appropriate committee) appoints an arrangements committee, taking into consideration the couple's suggestions about its composition.

Remarriage

Following the loss of a partner, the decision to undertake a new marriage or other committed relationship requires great faith, strength, and courage. The new relationship may be taken under the care of the meeting when a suitable period of time has elapsed after the loss, when consideration has been given to ensuring the welfare and legal rights of all children involved, and when it is felt that the circumstances of the new relationship are likely to make it successful and fruitful in spiritual happiness.

The processes of request, clearness, and oversight of the new relationship are identical to those outlined for first-time marriages and committed relationships. During the clearness process, however, special consideration is naturally given to issues pertinent to the changed circumstances. Where children or other relatives are involved, it is advisable for the clearness process to include them in some of the discussions. It is important that all parties hold one another in the Light.

Arrangements Committee

This committee, appointed by the monthly meeting or its appropriate committee, works with the couple to ensure that the couple's desires are met regarding the ceremony and that it is accomplished with simplicity, dignity, and reverence. The date, time, and place of the celebration are announced, and Friends are invited. (A small monthly meeting may choose to have one committee serve as both the clearness committee and the arrangements committee.)

Responsibilities of the Arrangements Committee for Weddings and Ceremonies of Other Committed Relationships

1. To see that the ceremony is accomplished with dignity, reverence, and simplicity.
2. To meet with the persons being joined together to discuss plans for the ceremony, including the choice of persons to (a) explain the format of a Quaker wedding near the beginning of the meeting for worship so that attendees unfamiliar with the practice are informed; (b) to carry a small table and the wedding certificate and pen to the couple for their signatures; (c) to read the certificate; and (d) to close meeting.
3. To see in advance that all legal requirements are met and that the couple has a marriage license, if that is their wish. The marriage license may need to be altered to reflect Quaker practice.
4. To facilitate the signing of the marriage certificate by all those present at the meeting for worship.
5. To see that the marriage license is signed, usually by the clerk of the meeting, and that the document is filed with the county clerk or designated official.
6. The monthly meeting minutes the celebration of each marriage or committed relationship at its business meeting. It is suggested that appropriate records be maintained in the meeting's archives.

The Couple's Responsibilities

1. To read about, understand, and follow the marriage procedures of the Religious Society of Friends.
2. To refrain from sending out wedding invitations until the clearness process is complete.
3. To call together the arrangements committee, discuss their plans in a timely fashion, and keep the committee informed.

4. To have the marriage certificate prepared in time for the ceremony.
5. To obtain a state marriage license, if that is the couple's desire, and to ensure that all legal requirements are met.

Traditional Friends Ceremony

The meeting for worship for the celebration of a marriage or a committed relationship gathers in silence at the appointed time. The meaning and procedure of the meeting for worship may have been explained in the invitations or it may be explained early in the meeting itself. Out of the silent worship, the couple will rise and, taking each other by the hand, declare in words to this effect, each speaking in turn:

In the presence of God, and before these our Friends, I take thee, _____, to be my (wife, husband, partner), promising, with divine assistance, to be unto thee a loving and faithful (husband, wife, partner), as long as we both shall live.

or

In the presence of God, and before these our Friends, I commit myself to thee, _____, promising, with divine assistance, to be unto thee loving and faithful, as long as we both shall live.

After these declarations, the certificate is signed by the couple and is then read to those gathered by a person appointed for that purpose.

Worship continues, often with rich vocal ministry, and is closed by someone appointed to do so. After the close of worship, all those gathered for the meeting for worship, including the children, sign the certificate.

Variations upon this procedure may be used by the couple with the approval of the arrangements committee.

Marriage ... is for life; and the wedding is a declaration that it is so....To turn a wedding into worship is to recognize that marriage is bigger than we are; that it is not just a pleasant arrangement we have made for our own convenience, but a vocation into which we have been drawn by nature and by God.

Harold Loukes, 1962, Faith and Practice, Britain Yearly Meeting, 1995

The Traditional Friends Marriage Certificate

WHEREAS, A.B., of (city or town) _____, son/daughter of C.B., of (city or town) _____ and D., his wife, and E.F., of (city or town) _____, daughter/son of G.F., of (city or town) _____ and H. _____, his wife, having declared their intentions of marriage with each other to _____ Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, held at (city or town) _____, (state) _____, according to the good order used among them, and having the consent of parents (or guardians), their proposed marriage was allowed by that Meeting.

NOW THESE ARE TO CERTIFY to whom it may concern, that for the accomplishment of their intentions, this _____ day of the _____ month, in the year of our Lord ____, they, A.B. and E.F., appeared in a Meeting for Worship of the Religious Society of Friends, held at (city or town) _____, (state) _____, and A.B., taking E.F. by the hand, did, on this solemn occasion declare that he/she took him/her, E.F., to be his/her wife/husband/partner, promising, with divine assistance, to be unto him/her a loving and faithful wife/husband/partner so long as they both shall live (or words to that effect); and then, in the same assembly, E.F. did in like manner declare that he/she took him/her, A.B., to be his/her wife/husband/partner, promising, with divine assistance, to be unto him/her a loving and faithful wife/husband/partner so long as they both shall live (or words to that effect). And moreover, they, A.B. and E.F., according to the custom of marriage, did, as a further confirmation thereof, then and there, to these presents, set their hands.

A.B.

E.B. or E.F.

AND WE, having been present at the marriage, have as witnesses set our hands the day and year above written.

Variations on the traditional certificate may be prepared by the couple in consultation with the arrangements committee, or preprinted traditional forms may be ordered from the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Office, 1515 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19102.

Marriage or Commitments Outside the Care of the Meeting

If a member is married or celebrates a commitment outside the care of the meeting, the Oversight Committee should arrange for someone to visit the new couple as an expression of the meeting's interest in them. It is assumed that the member will continue to be active in the meeting and that the non-member partner will be made welcome and invited to attend Meeting.

Meeting's Care for the Relationship

Friends are reminded that the meeting's oversight and care of a relationship does not end with the celebration but endures throughout the life of the relationship.

The clearness committee should plan to meet with the couple approximately a year after the ceremony to confirm the committee's continuing interest, care, and availability.

Meetings have an important role in nurturing, supporting, and celebrating the couples under their care. In a loving community of persons of similar religious values, couples can be sustained and guided in their efforts to build an enduring relationship. Communication among the members of the meeting is vital. Celebrations, workshops, and supportive discussion, as well as meetings for worship, are important for couples in all stages of their relationship. Couples often appreciate the feeling of oversight that the meeting offers when times are easy; they are encouraged to access the oversight process during difficult times.

Although it is true that Friends sometimes have a strong sense of privacy that makes them reluctant to bring forth personal problems, individuals and couples are encouraged to seek the care of the meeting in times of conflict. The meeting provides guidance and support for the couple and any children, including possible referral to trusted professionals for additional assistance. Couples are urged to go to the Oversight Committee, their clearness committee, or a person whom they particularly respect, to seek together a solution when they have difficulties or unresolved conflicts.

Advice in Periods of Difficulty

We would counsel Friends to take timely advice in periods of difficulty. The early sharing of problems with sympathetic Friends or marriage counselors can often bring release from misunderstandings and give positive help towards new joy together. Friends ought to be able to do this, but much will depend on the quality of our life together in the Society. If marriages among us fail, we are all part of that failure. We need to be more sensitive to each other's needs, knowing one another in the things which are material as in the things which are eternal.

Marriage & Parenthood Committee, 1956

Faith & Practice, London Yearly Meeting, 1972

Although marriages and other committed relationships are intended for life, with deep sorrow we acknowledge divorce among members. Meetings hold both parties tenderly and give special care to the children affected in these separations. No marriage or other committed relationship should be terminated lightly or quickly. If, after thoughtful and prayerful consideration and a period of seasoning, the couple finds that serious contemplation of separation or divorce is advisable, they are encouraged to seek clearness through their meeting's Oversight Committee. (In the event of an abusive relationship, a partner may decide that immediate separation is necessary.) A dissolution moves forward when the couple, the clearness committee, and God's leading make it clear that the marriage or other committed relationship no longer exists.

When two members are faced with separation or divorce, one or the other, or both, may feel alienated from further participation in meeting. If there has been an active clearness process, the sense of alienation may be lessened and separation may proceed with tenderness and charity. A worship service on the occasion of the dissolution of the marriage may be made available to seek God's grace for all and to acknowledge the marriage and its termination within the loving community of the meeting. This gives meeting members an opportunity to deal with what is often a major change in the structure of their community. It alerts them to

the needs of the divorcing members and their children, if any, and gives the divorcing members an opportunity to share their pain with the community and for the community to share its grief as well.

Queries Related to Separation and Divorce

1. How does the meeting acknowledge Friends who are contemplating divorce?
2. What is the meeting's role in caring for Friends undergoing separation or divorce? Does the meeting reach out to both of them?
3. Are Friends mindful of the meeting's responsibility to pay special attention to the children of separating parents, at a time when parents are perhaps less able than usual to nurture their children? Is the meeting mindful to be attentive to the needs of adult children when their parents divorce?
4. When separation/divorce has become a legal fact, how does the meeting publicly acknowledge and deal with it?
5. Is the meeting mindful of the lengthy disruption and readjustment period involved in divorce? Does the meeting follow up with the divorced parties six months or a year later?

Renewal of Vows

On occasion, after years of marriage or having been joined together outside of the meeting, a couple may desire to renew their vows in the presence of the Divine and the loving community of their meeting. A couple can request a Clearness Committee to explore the health of their relationship and to chart their future. The celebration is a wonderful opportunity for the meeting to express its loving support of the couple in a specially called meeting for worship.

We thank God, then, for the pleasures, joys and triumphs of [life together]; for the cups of tea we bring each other, and the seedlings in the garden frame; for the domestic drama of meetings and partings, sickness and recovery; for the grace of occasional extravagance, flowers on birthdays and unexpected presents; for talk at evenings of the events of the day; for the ecstasy of caresses; for gay mockery at each other's follies; for plans and projects, fun and struggle; praying that we may neither neglect nor undervalue these things, nor be tempted to think of them as self-contained and self-sufficient."

Faith and Practice, London Yearly Meeting, 1959

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*I sing the praise of danger, for we chart
A dangerous course, who would be man and wife:
Danger that conflict may decay to strife,
Or lambent passion harden into art;
Danger that sneaking death too soon may part
One from the other's lingering earthly life,
Danger from tottering ladder, glancing knife,
Insidious germ, or too much burdened heart.
But what is danger? Freedom's eldest son,
That marks us off from angel and from beast,
For they live most who cling to life the least
And gain the most who give what they have won.
Safety is for the slave, not for the free:
So will I walk with danger, and with thee!*

Kenneth Boulding, *Sonnets on Courtship, Marriage and Family*, 1990

* [Recognizing that \(1\) some meetings in Intermountain Yearly Meeting](#) do and others do not accomplish marriages between same-sex individuals, (2) the legal status of these relationships may change over time, and (3) there are many committed relationships between individuals of different sexes that are not marriages, this title is intended to include all such unions.