

## Marriage and Committed Relationships

*...That as many as are moved of the Lord in his light to take a brother or a sister in marriage, marriage being honourable in all, and the bed undefiled, let it be made known to the children of light, especially to those of the meeting of which the parties are members: that all in the light may it witness to be of God. And being by the light made manifest to be of God let them be joined together in the Lord ... in the presence of many witnesses; according to the example of the holy men of God in the Scriptures of truth recorded, which were written for our example and learning; that no scandal may rest upon the truth, nor anything be done in secret; but all things brought to the light that truth may trample over all deceit, and that they who are joined together in the Lord, may not by man be put asunder, whom God hath joined together.*

*Epistle from the Elders at Balby, 1656*

*Marriages and committed relationships pass through many phases, and through all phases the quality of the relationship is tested. The development of a relationship is a growing experience. Respect for each other and enduring, loving expression deepen the bond. With God's help, each couple finds a true path and a way of living that leads to a strong union. Yet, whatever the style of life, all relationships need a foundation of commitment, communication, honesty, and integrity. Patience, humor and a spirit of adventure, guided by a mutual trust in God's presence, strengthen the present and brighten the hope for the future.*

*Pacific Yearly Meeting, 1985 (adapted)*

*For over 300 years the Religious Society of Friends has struggled to understand and testify to our belief in basic human rights. We affirm again that there is that of God in every person. We are reminded that "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them" (1 John 4:16). We find that the Spirit of God is present in all loving relationships, regardless of the genders of those involved. ...*

*Therefore, North Pacific Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends endorses efforts to protect the civil rights of all persons regardless of their sexual orientation. Our love and support is for all persons and is not based upon the gender of the person they love.*

*North Pacific Yearly Meeting, minute approved at Annual Session, 1992*

Our spiritual journey can be enriched and strengthened in a loving, committed relationship. Friends have long recognized that some couples are called into a covenant relationship, a ministry of caring, which with divine assistance may open the door to deep and unreserved love, to forgiveness, to sharing strengths, to trust, and to the nurture of each other's growth.

Early Friends recognized that the joining of two people in such a covenant relationship

*is the work of the Lord only, and not the priests or magistrates; for it is God's ordinance and not man's; and therefore Friends cannot consent that they should join them together: for we marry none; it is the Lord's work, and we are but witnesses.*

*(George Fox, 1669)*

When two people feel called into such a covenant relationship and aspire to a lifetime commitment to each other, they seek clearness with their meeting. When the meeting finds clearness—in the couple, and within the meeting—to take their relationship under its care, the couple publicly affirms and celebrates their commitment to one another in a meeting for worship. The couple chooses what to call their relationship.

## Coming Under the Care of the Meeting

Couples need an established relationship with the meeting to come under its care. When a new commitment is formed, a meeting, through a Clearness Committee, counsels with the partners, seeking to establish their clearness in what they are undertaking. If the committee so recommends, and the meeting agrees, the relationship and couple are taken under the care of the meeting. This includes a meeting for worship at which the couple states their intentions, the meeting witnessing this, and a celebration to mark the occasion. The care of the meeting means that the couple is surrounded by a loving community which may take action as necessary to support the well-being of the two individuals, of the relationship itself, and of any children involved. The meeting offers this care in the form of support and guidance to every couple in the meeting.

When a couple unknown to the meeting community request a “Quaker wedding” they may be allowed to rent the meetinghouse and can be instructed in how a wedding after the manner of Friends is conducted. However, for the meeting to take a committed relationship or marriage under its care, at least one of the two individuals is currently a member or a regular attender of the meeting.

### Clearness Process

#### **Request**

When two people wish to have their covenant relationship taken under the care of the monthly meeting, they write a letter to the meeting, in care of the clerk, stating their intention and requesting the meeting to begin the clearness process. In the good order of Friends it is expected that a minimum of three months will be needed between the sending of the request and the desired date of the celebration.

#### **Clearness Committee**

When the couple requests that their commitment be taken under the care of the meeting, the Pastoral Care Committee<sup>1</sup> or the meeting appoints a Clearness Committee. It is important that members asked to serve be free of time constraints, be open to prayerful consideration regarding the right course of action, and be individuals well-versed in Friends practice.

The couple and the Clearness Committee meet together and separately for thoughtful and prayerful discussions to seek divine guidance regarding the proposed celebration. The committee or the couple may present specific queries or topics to give direction to the discussions, 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 to occur, and that any encumbrance be explored to ensure that all parties are free of conflicting obligations. The committee’s job is to help the couple take stock of the breadth and depth

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<sup>1</sup> *"The Oversight Committee" is a traditional Quaker name for the committee that organizes memorials, handles requests for membership or marriage under the care of the meeting, and coordinates help and comfort for Friends in need. In many meetings this function is combined with care for the community's spiritual life, hence the common name "Ministry & Oversight Committee"—the name used by NPYM and its quarterly meetings. However, "oversight" has connotations of slavery for many Friends, and they may use some other name in their meetings, such as Ministry & Counsel for a combined committee. Each Friends group names its committees in its own way. Reflecting the concern about "oversight," this Faith and Practice uses "Pastoral Care Committee" for the committee in a local Friends group that has responsibility for memorials, memberships, etc.*

### Steps and Timeline for Taking a Relationship under the Care of the Meeting

A marriage or committed relationship is taken under the care of a monthly meeting by these steps.

A meeting needs at least three months to take a marriage or committed relationship under its care.

1. The couple writes to the clerk of the meeting stating their intent and requesting that their marriage or relationship be taken under the care of the meeting.
2. The request is referred to the Pastoral Care Committee which appoints a Clearness Committee.
3. The Clearness Committee meets with the couple, in some cases several times.
4. When the committee and the couple are clear, the Clearness Committee reports to the Pastoral Care Committee that there is unity in the matter.
5. The Pastoral Care Committee carries the recommendation to the monthly meeting for business.
6. The monthly meeting accepts the report and allows at least a month for seasoning.
7. When the meeting approves taking the marriage under its care, it appoints an Arrangements Committee which assists in organizing the celebration of the marriage or committed relationship.
8. A called meeting for worship is the usual occasion for the couple to marry each other.

of their commitment and prepare for a shared lifetime together, including times both difficult and joyous.

It is well for the committee to have topics in mind and to see that they are covered. Most of these subjects will arise naturally in the course of the interviews, and it is preferable that the prospective partners feel free to broach them themselves.

1. *Background and acquaintance.* How well do the partners know each other? What are their basic common values? How do they adapt to differences in background, religion, temperament, and interests? Are they willing to listen deeply and respectfully to each other? Can they meet their differences with humor, mutual respect, patience, and generosity? Do they have the courage and the willingness to go together for outside guidance with any problem they are unable to solve?

2. *Religious beliefs, feelings, aspirations.* Do they see commitment or marriage as a spiritual relationship to be entered into with appreciation of its divine basis? How do they propose to meet their religious needs as a couple? How do they plan to make their relationship accessible to divine assistance? How do they endeavor to hold each other in the Light?

3. *Growth and fulfillment.* Do they think of themselves as trusted and equal partners, sharing responsibilities and decisions? In what ways are they supportive of each other's goals for personal growth and fulfillment? How do they communicate their feelings and needs, their dreams and fears to each other? Are they able to discuss their expectations of the intimate life they will share together?

4. *Daily living.* How do they discuss and work through questions regarding the use and management of money?

How will they resolve minor daily issues such as who takes out the trash or does the dishes? How do they deal with anger when it arises within the relationship? What ways have they found to resolve lifestyle issues, such as one being a morning person and one being an evening person, so that neither feels personally rejected? Have they explored attitudes towards holidays and gift-giving? Have they discussed the last names each will use?

5. *Remarriage.* A new marriage or committed relationship following the loss of a partner takes much faith, strength, and courage. Remarriage will raise questions for the couple such as: Has a suitable period of time elapsed to establish the new relationship? Are the circumstances of the new relationship likely to make it successful and fruitful in spiritual happiness? Will the current and former partner have any interactions with each other—and if so, how is their relationship with each other? What consideration have they given to assuring the welfare and legal rights of all the children involved? Can the children be involved in the clearness process? If the new relationship involves blending a family, has the couple given thorough and prayerful consideration to the new family structure?

6. *Relationships with others.* Are they aware of the need for developing a variety of other friendships that contribute both to individual growth and to their relationship? Have they considered together whether or not they desire children: the challenges as well as the joys children would bring, and the responsibilities for nurturing, guiding, and disciplining them? How do they view their relationships with each other's families and their obligations toward society?

7. *Relationship with the monthly meeting.* What does the couple expect the monthly meeting to do to support their relationship? Are there other religious group memberships?

8. *Prior commitments.* Do they have obligations, personal or financial, which need to be met or discharged? If one of the partners holds membership in another monthly meeting, the Clearness Committee should consult with that meeting.

9. *Attitude of families.* What are the views of their families toward the prospective marriage or commitment? Are there any family problems that may affect the couple's relationship? How might the couple address them?

10. *Timing.* Is this an appropriate time in each partner's life to undertake the new responsibilities and other changes that would result from a formal commitment to one another?

11. *The celebration.* How do they view the meeting for worship on the occasion of marriage or celebration which is to take place under the care of the meeting? Are they familiar with the procedure? Do they appreciate the values involved in the Quaker form of commitment?

When the couple and the committee are clear to recommend that the meeting take the couple under its care, the Clearness Committee reports its endorsement to the Pastoral Care Committee, which carries it to the monthly meeting, indicating that unity has been found. The monthly meeting accepts the report for consideration and seasoning and, when it is able to unite in approving the request, appoints an ad hoc Arrangements Committee for the celebration, guided by the couple's wishes. The Arrangements Committee and the couple set a time and a place for the called meeting for worship to celebrate the commitment.

It may be that unity to move forward is not readily found. The committee and the couple may choose to continue seeking God's will in this matter, or they may choose to lay aside the request indefinitely or permanently. When the right course of action is clear, the Clearness Committee reports that to the Pastoral Care Committee.

### **Arrangements Committee**

This committee, appointed by the monthly meeting, works with the couple to ensure that the couple's desires are met regarding the meeting for worship in celebration of the couple's commitment to one another and that it is accomplished with simplicity, dignity, and reverence. The reception, if any, is also part of the committee's responsibility.

Marriage after the manner of Friends entails two documents. One is the Quaker certificate, the other the state's certificate. Couples who meet their state's legal marriage requirements may wish to have their marriage legally recognized. If they do, it is their responsibility to acquire the marriage license; the Arrangements Committee arranges for the signature (usually of the clerk of the meeting) on the state's certificate of marriage and files it with the county. The state recognizes the couple as legally married when the certificate of marriage is signed and filed. The committee and the couple may be led to alter the state certificate, with appropriate legal advice, to reflect the actual practice of Friends.

### **Meeting to Celebrate Commitment**

The meeting for worship for the celebration gathers in silence at the appointed time. A description of marriage after the manner of Friends and of customary speech during the wedding is provided in the

invitations and early in the meeting. During worship the couple will rise, take each other by the hand, and each, speaking in turn, declare in words such as:

*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 you,  
\_\_\_\_\_, endeavoring, with divine assistance, to be a loving and faithful  
(husband/wife/partner).*

The couple is joined together by their vows; the meeting and all at the ceremony are the witnesses. Worship continues, often with rich vocal ministry, and is closed by the Arrangements Committee, or other Friends approved by them.

Traditionally couples sign the Quaker marriage certificate directly after making their vows, attesting to their commitment. It is available for signing by Friends and others attending the meeting at its close. The certificate is usually headed with the vows of the couple's choosing, and it includes the names of the couple, the date of the meeting for worship, and the fact that the relationship is under the care of the named monthly meeting. Examples of certificates are available from the yearly meeting.

The couple may use variations of these procedures with the approval of their Arrangements Committee.

## Meeting's Care for the Relationship

The meeting's care of a relationship does not end with the celebration. Meetings have an important role in nurturing, supporting, and celebrating all individuals who attend, as well as the couples under their care. In a loving community of persons of similar religious values and priorities, couples can be sustained and guided in their efforts to build an enduring relationship. Meetings may nurture

### Queries for Meetings about Nurturing Covenant Relationships

- How does our meeting nurture couples? Do the practices we follow meet the needs of couples in our meeting?
- Does our meeting provide resources that may be helpful to couples on various topics, such as couples' enrichment and parenting classes, or referrals to trained counselors and therapists, as necessary?
- What informal practices to support couples are encouraged among members and attenders?

committed relationships in many ways: workshops and supportive discussion groups, celebration of anniversaries, meetings for worship for the renewal of vows, and committees for clearness.

Some meetings offer ongoing care, with the Clearness Committee for marriage becoming a Continuing Care of the Marriage Committee that meets with the couple once a year for reflection on their marriage. The Continuing Care Committee may report in writing to the Pastoral Care Committee. The couples under continuing care may find that continuing care supports them in their relationship and in their connection to the meeting.

Friends are frequently very private and reluctant to bring forth personal or relationship problems. Nevertheless, each couple must be aware that their committed relationship has far-reaching effects on others, including those in meeting. In taking the couple under its care, the meeting assumes the responsibility

to be steadfast and direct, as well as sensitive, in fulfilling its obligation of care, in the hope that the couple is willing to seek divine help and to make use of the assistance the meeting is able to provide. If a couple is in conflict, meeting does not assume that the partners will come to the meeting as a couple to seek assistance, but will offer its assistance. However, neither the meeting nor any committee takes on the role of therapist or psychological counselor.

**Care for Commitments Made Outside the Meeting.** If a member is married or celebrates a commitment outside the care of the meeting, the Pastoral Care Committee arranges for someone to visit with the new couple, expressing the meeting's care and assuring them that the non-member partner will be made welcome.

When a couple has been married under the care of another meeting, in another religious tradition, or in a civil proceeding, the partners may ask the Pastoral Care Committee to have their relationship taken under the care of the current meeting. If so, a Clearness Committee can be appointed and the same process of recommendation to the meeting may be followed, with amended queries, and ending with the meeting's acceptance of the care of the relationship.

*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.*

*London Yearly Meeting, 1960*

## **Renewal of Vows**

A couple joined together outside of the meeting or a couple that has been married for many years may desire to renew their vows in the presence of the Divine and the loving community of their meeting. The couple asks for a Clearness Committee, through the Pastoral Care Committee, to explore the health of their relationship and to chart their future. If the couple and the Clearness Committee reach clarity, they recommend to the Pastoral Care Committee that the couple reaffirm their vows in a called meeting for worship. This celebration is an opportunity for the meeting to express its loving support of the couple.

## **Separation and Divorce**

*"If someone from my meeting had just sat with me to hold my separating marriage in the Light for 15 minutes, it would have made all the difference in the world to me."*

*A North Pacific Yearly Meeting Friend, 2012*

Committed relationships can experience both fulfillment and tension. Whether or not their relationship is formally under the meeting's care, if a couple encounters difficulties and their relationship is under strain, they are encouraged to seek assistance through the Pastoral Care Committee. Meetings wisely exercise caution in providing such assistance. Individuals and committees in meetings rarely possess the training and expertise necessary to counsel couples in conflict in areas of psychology and the law. The Pastoral Care Committee may refer the couple to a qualified counselor. Meetings understand that emotions during such intimate conflict may be powerful and destructive, both to the individuals and to the meeting. Some couples do not want the meeting involved in their conflict; the meeting recognizes and honors that wish. Meetings are advised not to take sides in the separation and to avoid the enforcement or management of legal no-contact orders.

No marriage or 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 further clearness through the Pastoral Care Committee. If the couple requests a Clearness Committee, either as a couple or as individuals, the meeting provides it, recognizing that such a committee can provide spiritual guidance, but not

psychological or legal consultation. The Clearness Committee meets to foster compassionate communication so that the couple's decisions can be made in a spirit of forgiveness. It is generally preferable to have one Clearness Committee for the couple. When it proves necessary to have a separate committee for each partner, the two committees work together closely and may meet jointly at intervals to maintain communication. The Clearness Committee members are not marriage counselors or problem solvers; instead, they offer to walk on a painful journey with the family, reminding them to seek God's assistance with every step.

A dissolution moves forward when it is clear that the marriage or committed relationship no longer exists.

When there is an abusive relationship, immediate separation may be necessary to protect all those involved from further harm.

When children are involved, the meeting should remember their enduring need for love and security, both at home and in the meeting community, and take care to protect them so that they are not turned against either parent.

When both individuals in the separating or divorcing couple are active in the same meeting, one or both may feel alienated from further participation there. If the meeting has taken an active role in the clearness process, the sense of alienation may be lessened and separation may proceed with tenderness and charity. All in the meeting are lovingly advised to answer that of God in both individuals. When an individual is going through a painful divorce, sometimes a word spoken in love will make a tremendous difference. The meeting community may have its own sense of failure and loss to work through.

*We would counsel Friends to take timely advice in periods of difficulty. The early sharing of problems with sympathetic Friends or marriage counsellors 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.*

*London Yearly Meeting Marriage & Parenthood Committee, 1956*