

Marriage Section of SAYMA Faith and Practice, submitted for approval to SAYMA 2010

[original text]

C. Marriage

A person's spiritual development can be strengthened in a loving committed relationship. Friends have long recognized that some couples are called into such a relationship, a ministry of caring, which with Divine assistance may open the way to deep and unreserved love, to forgiveness, to trust, and to the nurture of each other's gifts. Early Friends recognized that the joining of two people in this 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)

In the joining of Friends, a couple commit themselves to a shared life, bringing into being a new family. During a meeting for worship, usually one especially called for the purpose of the marriage, they stand in the presence of God and of friends gathered and declare their commitment, with divine assistance, to remain loving and faithful for life.

In Friends tradition, marriage takes place in a community of faith. It is not only an act of two individuals, but the act of a community. The corporate signing of the marriage certificate testifies to this fact. The meeting's involvement with the couple begins with the appointment of a clearness committee, which meets with the couple in a spirit of worship and concern for the proposed marriage. This committee helps the couple affirm their clearness for marriage by examining, with them, not only their clearness from prior obligations of any kind but many other aspects of their relationship, including their strengths and potential differences. This process of clarifying, the task of the

[proposed revision]

C. Marriage Among Friends

[1] Friends have long recognized that some couples are called into a loving, committed relationship: a ministry of caring. With Divine assistance, this commitment may open the way to deep and unreserved love, to forgiveness, to trust, to spiritual development and nurture of each other's gifts. Early Friends understood that the joining of two people in this 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) Likewise, SAYMA meetings follow the general Quaker practice that marriage is a matter between God and the couple, witnessed by the meeting.

[2] In a Quaker marriage, two people commit themselves to a shared life, bringing into being a new family. During a meeting for worship, usually one especially called for the purpose of the marriage, they stand in the presence of God and of friends gathered and declare their intention, with divine assistance, to remain loving and faithful for life.

[3] In Friends tradition, marriage takes place in a community of faith. Quaker marriage involves not only two individuals, but also the entire community. The corporate signing of the marriage certificate testifies to this fact.

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entire group gathered together, may in itself deepen their relationship and understanding of each other, or it may reveal problems that should preclude the marriage. The clearness process is complete only when the decision is clear to all.

A monthly meeting remains concerned for all the marriages within it. Recognizing that in a marriage people go through many changes and that difficulties can arise in any relationship, members of the meeting should be in touch with the couple, expressing their love and concern. A member of the ministry and oversight committee or the clearness committee for the marriage may take the initiative in offering to help the couple attain clearness when problems arise. A couple is encouraged to call on the meeting or a specially appointed clearness committee to help resolve difficulties. Friends also have found that marriage enrichment retreats and similar supports help foster strong and growing relationships. We live in a time when, for some people, individual fulfillment and growth in marriage seem mutually exclusive. The experience and faith of Friends is that, undertaken in faith, marriage can be both stable and creative, and that such a marriage may form the best environment for the nurture and fulfillment of each individual and any children they may have.

Each Monthly meeting receives and responds appropriately to requests for recognizing and supporting loving and committed relationships other than traditional legal marriage. Meetings are called to approach each request in the spirit of tenderness and openness to God's leading. Friends continue to affirm the value of an environment of commitment in fostering human growth.

[proposed revision]

[4] In the earliest days of Quakerism, legal marriage was possible only within the Church of England. The social services available were provided only by the established church and were not available to Quakers. Friends took care of each other through their monthly and yearly meetings. Since development of the concept of civil marriage, Friends have been able to rely more on the legal and social protections now provided to people with state-sanctioned marriages and have assumed less responsibility for their mutual economic support.

[5] From time to time, Friends face the challenge of taking under their care marriages, such as same sex marriages, that are not recognized by the state. Any Monthly Meeting may receive a request to recognize and support a loving, committed relationship, state-recognized or not. Meetings are called to approach and respond to each request in the spirit of tenderness and openness to God's leading.

1. Clearness for marriage

[6] When seeking meeting approval, the couple writes a letter to the meeting stating their intention to marry and their desire to marry under the care of the meeting. If only one, or neither, is a Friend, the meeting will want to take time to develop a communal bond with the couple before deciding to take the marriage under its care. If the couple maintains membership in different meetings, they will send letters to both meetings, requesting approval from each.

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1. Meeting approval

To secure meeting approval, the couple writes a letter to the meeting stating their intention to marry and their desire to marry under the care of the meeting. If only one, or neither, is a Friend, the meeting will want to take time to develop a communal bond with the couple before deciding to take the marriage under its care. If the couple maintains membership in different meetings, their letter should be sent to both meetings and approval obtained from each.

When the letter is brought to the monthly meeting for business, the meeting - or in some meetings the ministry and oversight committee - appoints a committee for clearness. After the clearness committee has met with both intended partners (see above) and has reviewed with them the promises they intend to exchange, it brings a recommendation back to the monthly meeting, usually the following month. If the meeting allows the wedding under its care, it appoints a committee of oversight for the wedding. Only at this point can invitations and final plans be made.

2. Planning for the wedding

The oversight committee, together with the couple, arranges to meet legal requirements and to accomplish the marriage with simplicity and reverence. The reception, if any, is also part of their responsibility.

The oversight committee must know the legal requirements where the marriage will occur. It is the couple's responsibility

[proposed revision]

[7] In some meetings this letter is brought to the monthly meeting for business, in others to the Ministry and Nurture/Counsel Committee or another designated committee. The appropriate body then appoints a committee for clearness to meet with the couple in a spirit of worship and concern for the proposed marriage. This committee helps the couple affirm their clearness for marriage by examining with them not only their clearness from prior conflicting obligations of any kind but many other aspects of their relationship. These aspects might include potential strengths and weaknesses, hopes and dreams, equality in roles and work, and relationships to money and children. Discussion about wills and other legal arrangements needed to secure the relationship the couple desires occurs at this stage. Individual meetings may prepare a list of queries for use by their clearness committees for marriage.

[8] The process of clarification is the task of the entire group gathered together. It may deepen the couple's relationship and understanding of each other, or it may reveal problems that must be addressed before the marriage can proceed or that preclude the marriage at that time. The clearness process is complete only when the decision is clear to all. Once clearness is reached, either the clearness committee or the Ministry and Nurture Committee makes a recommendation to the next business meeting. If the meeting agrees to take the marriage under its care, it appoints a wedding planning committee. Proceeding in good Quaker order, and to avoid possible embarrassment and unnecessary expense, couples are advised to refrain from issuing invitations and making reservations until the meeting has agreed to take the marriage under its care.

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to secure the marriage license or other legal form to be filed, by the committee, with the county clerk or similar officer after the marriage has taken place. Some localities have a special form for the Religious Society of Friends, but if not the committee can usually change the standard wording to comply with Friends' procedures. An approved meeting member must sign to represent the meeting, and others sign to fill the required number of witnesses.

The marriage certificate shall be prepared, well in advance, in a form similar to the following but carefully worded to incorporate the particular declarations that will be spoken by the couple and have been previously agreed upon with the committee for clearness:

Whereas, A.B., of _____, child/son/daughter of C.B. and H.B., of _____, and D.E., of _____, child/son/daughter of F.E. and M.E., of _____, having declared their intentions of marriage with each other to _____ Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends held at _____, their proposed marriage was allowed by the meeting.

Now this is to certify to whom it may concern, that for the accomplishment of their intentions, this _____ day of the _____ month, in the year _____, they, A.B. and D.E., appeared in a meeting for worship of the Religious Society of Friends, held at _____, A.B. and D.E., taking each other by the hand, did on this solemn occasion declare that they promise with divine assistance to be unto each other loving and faithful wife/husband/ partners so long as they both shall live. And moreover they, A.B. and D.E.*, did, as further confirmation thereof, then and there, to this certificate set their hands.

A.B. _____

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2. Planning for the wedding

[9] The wedding planning committee, together with the couple, reviews the promises which the couple will exchange, plans to accomplish the wedding with simplicity and reverence, and may help plan the reception.

[10] There is no standard formula for a Quaker marriage promise. The couple discerns the wording of the promises and reviews the wording with the committee. Similar words, translated from first person to third person, are also stated in the marriage certificate. The following is a sample of a Quaker marriage promise: "In the presence of God and these our friends I take thee _____ to be my wife/husband/partner, promising with Divine assistance to be unto thee a loving and faithful wife/husband/partner so long as we both shall live." The couple may be led to alter or add to this wording. The wedding planning committee and the couple designate in advance persons to carry out the following responsibilities: greeting, explaining meeting for worship and Friends' wedding procedures; reading the certificate after the couple signs; closing the meeting; and inviting all those present to sign the certificate as witnesses. If a reception will follow the meeting for worship for marriage, the wedding planning committee may help in arranging and providing for the reception. The wedding and the reception are separate events.

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D.E. _____

And we, having been present at the marriage, have as witnesses hereunto set our hands.

*A phrase may be added here when one or both of a couple chooses to change his and/or her name.

Many choose to hand-letter their certificates on parchment or fine paper.

The wedding planning committee and the couple to be married should designate in advance persons to carry out the following responsibilities: explaining meeting for worship and Friends' wedding procedures; reading the certificate after the couple signs; closing the meeting; inviting those present to sign the certificate as witnesses.

3. The wedding itself

At the time appointed, the meeting for worship on the occasion of marriage gathers in silence. For the benefit of non-Friends, the person appointed explains the meaning of the worship and the procedure to follow, unless the invitations have already done so. After a suitable time, as they are moved, the couple will rise and, taking each other by the hand, declare in words to this effect:

In the presence of God and these our friends I take thee _____ to be my wife/husband/partner, promising with Divine assistance to be unto thee a loving and faithful wife/husband/partner so long as we both shall live.

The couple will then sign the marriage certificate, and the appointed Friend will read it aloud.

[proposed revision]

[11] The couple will arrange for preparation of the marriage certificate, well in advance, in a form similar to the following. The wording incorporates the promises that the couple will speak during the wedding as agreed upon with the committee for clearness:

Whereas, A.B., of _____, child/son/daughter of C.B. and H.B., of _____, and D.E., of _____, child/son/daughter of F.E. and M.E., of _____, having declared their intentions of marriage with each other to _____ Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends held at _____, their proposed marriage was taken under the care of the meeting.

Now this is to certify to whom it may concern, that for the accomplishment of their intentions, this _____ day of the _____ month, in the year _____, they, A.B. and D.E., appeared in a meeting for worship of the Religious Society of Friends, held at _____, A.B. and D.E., taking each other by the hand, did on this solemn occasion declare that they promise with divine assistance to be unto each other loving and faithful wife/husband/partners so long as they both shall live. And moreover they, A.B. and D.E.*, did, as further confirmation thereof, then and there, to this certificate set their hands.

A.B. _____

D.E. _____

And we, having been present at the marriage, have as witnesses hereunto set our hands.

Many choose to hand-letter their certificates on parchment or fine paper.

*A phrase may be added here when one or both individuals chooses to change names.

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In the period of worship to follow, any may speak as they are moved. After the rise of the meeting, everyone present is invited to sign the marriage certificate.

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3. The wedding itself

[12] At the time appointed, the meeting for worship for marriage gathers in silence. For the benefit of non-Friends, the person appointed explains the meaning of the worship and the procedure to follow. Out of the silence, as they are moved, the couple will rise and, taking each other by the hand, speak their promises to one another. The couple then signs the marriage certificate, and the appointed Friend reads it aloud. In the period of worship to follow, guests may speak out of the silence as they are moved. After the rise of the meeting, all present are invited to sign the marriage certificate. When there will also be a state-sanctioned marriage, those papers will be signed separately from the Quaker meeting for worship for marriage.

4. State-sanctioned marriage

[13] Meetings within SAYMA differ in their approach to state-sanctioned marriages under their care because we live in states that deny the secular institution of marriage to same-gender couples. From time to time, states change the laws affecting Quaker marriage. Quaker meetings need to stay informed about the current legal status of marriages for all couples within their jurisdictions.

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[14] Each meeting decides its own approach to the legal aspects of marriages under their care. Some meetings will help eligible couples complete state-approved forms that give legal status to marriage. In these cases, it is the couple's responsibility to secure the license. The wedding planning committee will arrange to have it signed after the meeting for worship for marriage, and the couple will then file it. Some meetings offer only a Quaker marriage since not all couples are eligible for state-sanctioned marriage. In these meetings, eligible couples desiring a state-recognized marriage must go before a state-approved official to obtain it. Some meetings may help couples complete state-approved forms even if they are not considered eligible and support those couples in seeking eligibility from the State.

5. Nurturing marriage under the care of the Meeting

[15] The meeting's involvement with the couple begins with the application for marriage under the care of the meeting, and may continue indefinitely. A monthly meeting remains concerned for all the marriages within it and may offer various forms of support to married couples. Friends have found that marriage enrichment retreats and similar supports help foster strong and growing relationships. The couple and its committee for clearness may meet on a mutually agreed timetable to allow airing of joys and concerns that manifest in the marriage.

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[16] People go through many changes and difficulties can arise in any relationship. Members of meetings should be sensitive to the health of marriages under their care and express their love and concern. If problems arise and help from the meeting might assist in their resolution, a member of the Ministry and Nurture Committee or the clearness committee for the marriage may initiate an effort to help the couple attain clearness. All couples, including those not married under its care, are encouraged to call on the meeting or a specially appointed clearness committee to help resolve difficulties.

[17] The experience and faith of Friends is that, undertaken in faith, marriage may be fulfilling, nurturing and enduring.