

SAYMA Faith & Practice, revisions approved June 2010

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 depend 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.

[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. In this situation, Friends took care of each other through their monthly and yearly meetings. Since development of the concept of civil marriage, many Friends have been able to rely more on the legal and social protections now provided to people with state-recognized 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

[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, expectations 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.

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 required formula for the declaration of 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 traditional example: —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.

[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. [note: a phrase may be added here when one or both individuals chooses to change names], 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.

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, declare 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-recognized marriage, those papers will be signed separately from the Quaker meeting for worship for marriage.

4. State-recognized marriage

[13] Meetings within SAYMA differ in their approach to state-recognized 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.

[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-recognized 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. In some marriages, the couple and

its committee for clearness may continue to meet on a mutually agreed timetable to allow airing of joys and concerns that manifest in the marriage.

[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] 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 marriage can be both stable and creative as well as nurturing and fulfilling.