

## Marriage

*Marriage being an ordinance affecting all the relations of life, it is affectionately advised that, before any purpose to enter therein, they do humbly ask the counsel of the Lord: and if they have a clear evidence of Divine approval, that they acquaint their parents or guardians with their intentions, and give due heed to their deliberate advice, so that they may be preserved from the dangerous bias of uncertain affection and from the bitter fruit of improper marriages.*

Rules of Discipline and Advices of Illinois Yearly Meeting, editions of 1878 and 1892

Marriage, as understood by Friends, is a relation involving two individuals, God, and the religious community that witnesses, recognizes and supports it.

For the individuals joined in marriage, it is a religious calling; it is a commitment of their subsequent lives to serve one another equally and with earnestly sought divine assistance to be loving and faithful marriage partners as long as they both shall live. The couple, in effect, calls on God to bless and support their union. But more than this, Quaker procedure requires that they have sought divine guidance for the marriage. Marriage is then a covenant among God and the two persons who marry one another: God's participation sanctifies the union.

The love of one another to which God calls us is neither a feeling nor a static relationship that one either has or doesn't have; like life, like self, it is always a journey, a work in progress. Marriage involves a mutual commitment to share your lives, following together a path of love requiring growth, integrity, and mutual respect. The religious dimension of marriage is found not only in the understanding that God sanctions the union and strengthens it when we humbly seek together unity in God, but also in the recognition that marriage is a special opportunity for the practice of that love to which we are more generally called.

A marriage also has a social and public dimension, since it represents a way of living in community; marriage under the care of the meeting establishes a new relationship between the individuals marrying one another and the meeting community that recognizes and cares for it. The wedding is at once the occasion for the couple to enter into matrimony and the meeting's act of witness and loving support of this covenant. There are two important implications that flow from this: First, the meeting needs to be involved in a timely way in the discernment process that leads to the meeting's taking the marriage under its care, and this in turn to the procedures that Friends have established for this process. Second, the responsibilities of the married couple to the meeting and the meeting to the couple do not end with the completion of the wedding.

The meeting, working through a clearness process, explores with the couple proposing marriage whether to allow the marriage to proceed under its care. Originally, such clearness processes were intended to ascertain whether there were any impediments to the marriage, for example other marriage commitments that would be incompatible with the proposed marriage, and any impediments to the meeting's taking the marriage under its care, for instance failure to accept Friends' discipline. In 1682 the Uppeside of Bucks Monthly Meeting (England) did not allow a marriage under its care because the young man involved refused to appear before the women's meeting for business, contrary to the order of Friends then established. These two aspects of clearness still remain: whether there are any impediments that would preclude a proper marriage and whether there are any impediments to the meeting's taking the proposed

marriage under its care. A third function served by the clearness process is to discern whether the two individuals wishing to marry understand that the relationship into which they would be entering has a religious dimension. In modern times, clearness committees have also come to assist the couple to examine whether they have reservations they have inadequately acknowledged or examined, or whether there are problem areas that they, as a couple, have not carefully considered together.

The wedding itself, conducted under the supervision of a designated committee of the meeting, is a meeting for worship called for the purpose of marriage. In the unprogrammed tradition of Friends, to which Illinois Yearly Meeting belongs, there is no minister whose office is to marry the two persons entering matrimony. Instead, the two with all those gathered for the occasion settle into silent, waiting worship. When the two are moved by the Spirit, they rise and taking one another by the hand proclaim their commitment to one another “in the presence of God and before these our friends,” as the traditional language has it. They sign a certificate that relates the taking of their vows and worship continues, with those present offering such messages suitable to the occasion as are given to them. At the conclusion of the meeting, all those present are invited to sign the certificate in witness thereto.

There are two aspects to the meeting’s role in the marriage after the clearness process: oversight and assistance in the planning of the wedding itself, and care of the marriage following the wedding. Meetings continue to bear responsibility to support the marriages under their care and the individuals who married. Thus it is expected that the meeting know well at least one of the two who have applied for marriage, and typically that at least one be a member of the Religious Society of Friends, if not of the meeting itself. (State law may require this for the Quaker wedding to have legal status.)

## **Same Sex Marriage**

*Illinois Yearly Meeting is aware that there is great diversity in the relationships that people develop with one another. The worth of these relationships must not be judged on the basis of conventionality but rather to the degree that the relationship contributes to the growth of love in those affected.*

Minutes of Illinois Yearly Meeting, 1974

Many Friends meetings, including a number in Illinois Yearly Meeting, have taken marriages of same sex couples under their care. For all marriages the procedure is the same and the same care should be extended for the couple.

## **Marriage Procedure**

The process for marriage under the care of the meeting starts with a letter from the couple, signed by both, to the meeting stating the intention of marriage and asking to be married under the care of the meeting. The letter may include a tentative date; couples are cautioned that Friends process typically takes several months.

The clerk reads the letter of request to the monthly meeting for business, which may then either appoint a clearness committee directly or refer this request to the meeting’s care and counsel or analogous committee to appoint a clearness committee. Whichever body appoints the clearness committee should

carefully consider the particular circumstances and characteristics of the couple in choosing members of the committee.

The clearness process may take several meetings and may need to begin with an explanation of the process, as it may be unfamiliar or intimidating to some. The clearness committee meets with the couple and helps them explore the issues of a life together. It also has the responsibility of seeing if there are impediments to proceeding with the marriage. Since the vows come out of Friends principles and the couple's understanding of what they are agreeing to in marrying, it is appropriate for the content of the vows to be considered with the clearness committee. (The next section has suggestions on questions and issues to consider in the clearness process. The section afterward has examples of vows.)

When the clearness committee is ready it reports back to the monthly meeting or to the care and counsel committee which makes its recommendation to the monthly meeting. If the monthly meeting then approves the marriage under its care, it appoints an arrangements committee, which is charged with working with the couple to see that the wedding is conducted consistently with Friends principles and to help with the many details. At this point the date can be finalized and the arrangements can be made for the wedding.

The meeting needs to be aware that they may work with couples where one of the individuals may not be a member of the meeting or even a Friend. Sometimes the wedding is to occur far from the home meeting or it may include multiple monthly meetings. Care should be taken in coordinating the various responsibilities among those involved. Situations like this may make the process take longer and require that the meeting prayerfully discern how to assist the couple.

The wedding celebration should reflect Friends testimonies of simplicity, community, integrity, and equality. In light of this, the arrangements committee reviews the couple's wording of the vows and the certificate. When there are other traditions to be incorporated (for instance if only one of the couple is a Friend), the arrangements committee needs to be flexible and sensitive both to Friends principles and to others' cultural and religious experiences.

The arrangements committee helps the couple with plans for the ceremony and celebration. It assists the couple in arranging for preparation of the certificate using archival quality materials, making sure that there are pens with acid free indelible ink for use in signing it, supervising the signing of the certificate and making sure that it gets back to the couple after the wedding. The arrangements committee should assist the couple in handling legal issues related to the wedding. Legal requirements may vary by state; the committee is advised to check with local county officials. The couple and the arrangements committee should make sure someone is designated to read the certificate, to close the meeting, and to sign and submit any legal documents. A minute from the meeting designating a Friend or Friends to sign and submit legal documents is advisable.

The wedding itself is a meeting for worship. While members of the Meeting (who should be welcome) will know what to expect, invited guests may not, so care should be taken to let them know what is going to happen.

Right after the wedding there are often some refreshments for those at the wedding. Many meetings have a potluck dinner. Some may also have a smaller reception at a separate location.

The arrangements committee should report back to the Monthly Meeting that the wedding was successfully accomplished and see that a copy or transcript of the certificate has been placed in the Meeting's records. After the wedding, the meeting has a responsibility to care for the marriage, continuing to hold the couple in the Light.

## **Possible queries for the clearness for marriage process:**

The queries provided below may be used to assist Friends who are seeking marriage under the care of the Meeting as they prayerfully consider their decision. Their purpose is to encourage communication between the couple on topics relevant to aspects of their relationship. Couples are not expected to provide the committee with private details of their relationship, but it is hoped that this process will ensure that the couple has considered such issues together prior to their marriage. Developing effective communication is important because not all challenges in a marriage can be anticipated.

The questions below are meant to serve as examples only — the couple and the committee discern what questions to consider in their sessions together. Queries not discussed with the committee may be provided to the couple for their consideration.

### *Marriage Queries*

Have you sought divine guidance in your decision to marry?

How will you make marriage a sacred and lifelong relationship?

Have you discussed with each other your religious beliefs and the role they will have in your life together? How do you expect your faith to inform your decision-making as a couple? Have you discussed the religious upbringing of any children you may have?

How do you nurture your relationship? How will you uphold and strengthen the relationship with the passage of time?

How do you communicate with each other? What are sources of potential conflicts between you? When conflicts arise, how do you handle them?

Have you discussed how you will make decisions as a couple?

Have you discussed what each of you will bring to the relationship, including practical issues in the maintenance of a household?

Have you discussed your expectations of sexuality in marriage?

Have you discussed whether you want to have children? How large a family do you envision? How soon do you anticipate having children? What are your expectations about how you will raise, discipline, and educate your children?

Have you discussed whether either or both of you will change your names and have you discussed what last name any children will have?

If either of you has children have you considered the impact of this marriage on them?

Have you discussed how you will balance the needs of your marriage with your friendships and responsibilities outside the home (for example, work, volunteer activities, education)?

Have you discussed how your finances will be managed? Do you have similar expectations about income, saving, spending and borrowing?

If there may be situations in which this marriage will not be legally recognized, have you discussed how to protect each other's legal rights?

How will you support each other through times of trial, unexpected life changes, or unfulfilled hopes and dreams? Are you willing to listen together for spiritual guidance when you face a problem without a clear answer and/or ask for a clearness committee?

Are you willing to postpone personal fulfillment if your spouse is not ready for what that might entail?

What do you expect your relationship with the meeting to be in your life as a couple?

How could the meeting support your marriage in the years to come?

Do either of you have emotional or other commitments to a third person which would interfere with this marriage?

Have you examined own patterns of behavior in previous relationships, and considered how they might need to change as you enter this marriage?

Has any legal divorce been finalized?

What are the views of your families regarding the marriage?

Have you discussed how you intend to keep close relations with family who may live far away (especially in cases of illness or old age)?

Do you have an understanding of the cultural, religious, and language background of your partner?

Have you discussed any issues from your lives to this point that might affect your marriage?

Have you discussed practices to sustain your marriage?

**Possible wording for vows and certificate:**

With the help of the arrangements committee the couple should agree on the text of the vows and the certificate. Below are general principles that need to be included and two examples of each: one

traditional and historical and another more contemporary. Either of these may be modified or the couple may compose their own text.

In keeping with Friends' testimony of equality both parties in a marriage make the same promises. The vows are not elaborate. They should state clearly that the two individuals are marrying each other, and promise to be loving and faithful to each other as long as they both shall live. The vows acknowledge the religious or spiritual dimension of the marriage and the importance of the gathered community.

*Historical (From Book of Discipline of the Religious Society of Friends, adopted by Illinois Yearly Meeting, 1927):*

“In the presence of God and before these our friends, I, \_\_\_\_\_, take thee, \_\_\_\_\_, to be my wife (husband), promising, with Divine assistance, to be unto thee a loving and faithful husband (wife) as long as we both shall live.”

*Or:*

“In the presence of God and these our Friends, I, \_\_\_\_\_, commit myself to you, \_\_\_\_\_, in marriage, promising with Divine assistance to be a loving and faithful partner (husband, wife) to you as long as we both shall live.”

*Suggestions for the certificate:*

The certificate must include the names of the individuals being married, date and location of the wedding, meeting under whose care it is occurring, the substance of the vows, and space for signatures of the couple and of those attending. This is an important record of the marriage, not just a keepsake.

*Historical (From Rules of Discipline and Advices of Illinois Yearly Meeting 1878):*

Whereas, \_\_\_\_\_ (man's name), of \_\_\_\_\_ (town), in the county of \_\_\_\_\_, and State of \_\_\_\_\_, son of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_, his wife, of \_\_\_\_\_, in the county of \_\_\_\_\_, in the State of \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_ (woman's name), daughter of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_, his wife, of \_\_\_\_\_, in the county of \_\_\_\_\_, and State of \_\_\_\_\_, having informed \_\_\_\_\_ Meeting of the Society of Friends, that they intend marriage with each other, and no obstruction appearing, (consent of parents or guardians being given, if the parties are minors,) their proposal of marriage was allowed by said meeting.

This is to certify, that in the accomplishment of their marriage, this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_ month, in the year \_\_\_\_\_, the said \_\_\_\_\_ (man's name) and \_\_\_\_\_ (woman's name) appeared at (here state the meeting place or residence where the marriage is accomplished), and in the presence of a committee of said meeting and other witnesses, the said \_\_\_\_\_ (man's name) took the said \_\_\_\_\_ (woman's name) by the hand and declared that he took her to be his wife, promising to be to her a faithful and affectionate husband until death should separate them; and she the said \_\_\_\_\_ did in like manner declare that she took him the said \_\_\_\_\_ to be her husband, promising to be to him a faithful and affectionate wife until

death should separate them, they did then and there sign their names to this certificate, she in accordance with custom assuming the family name of her husband.

(Man's name) \_\_\_\_\_.

(Woman's name) \_\_\_\_\_.

And we having been present at the solemnization of the said marriage, have subscribed our names as witnesses thereto.

*Or:*

Having felt the call to marry each other, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_, whose parents are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_, sought and received the approval of \_\_\_\_\_ Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends to marry under the care of that meeting. To accomplish that end a meeting for worship was held on the \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_ month, \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_. During that meeting \_\_\_\_\_ rose and said that (insert wording of vow here). \_\_\_\_\_ then said that (insert wording of vow here).

\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ signed here witnessing their promises to each other:

and we, being present, signed as witnesses:

## **Care of Marriages**

Strong marriage relationships contribute to the strength and spiritual growth of the meeting community. At the same time, "marriage is recognized to be not an easy bond, but a high calling." Friends are aware that care for a marriage, therefore, goes beyond the clearness process and the wedding to include an ongoing relationship with the couple. Indeed, the meeting is enriched by all marriages in the community and benefits by providing care and attention to each marriage whether or not the wedding was conducted under the care of the meeting.

Married Friends have testified to the value of their participation together in the life of the Meeting, of the opportunities provided by a supportive community to deepen their spiritual fellowship and love. In keeping with Friends' understanding of marriage, it is helpful for a meeting to be careful to treat each partner in a marriage as a valued individual and to honor their union.

The meeting also bears responsibility to care for marriages in which only one of the couple is an active participant in the Meeting. The Meeting should welcome both as equal partners in the marriage and provide care and support as the opportunity arises.

There is no formula for proper care of marriages, nor any tradition of formal mechanisms for doing so. Meetings are encouraged to be mindful of the importance of marriages, children, and families

to the meeting community and to seek ways to support them, as it seeks ways to support and nurture all the individuals within the meeting.

Meetings need to be aware that there are a variety of life changes that may create stress in marriages. Eventually most couples will encounter serious illness or disability of one of the couple, a child, or parents; employment transitions; changing financial circumstances; aging; and death in the family. Couples may also face stresses from religious differences, changing perception of gender identity or sexual orientation, change of calling, or service commitments, among others.

Care of a marriage may be in the form of regular interaction with the couple by designated members of the meeting (a marriage care committee). This committee may be the regular care and counsel or pastoral care committee of the meeting, the couple's marriage clearness or arrangements committee, a specially designated committee, or a group of couples providing mutual support. A marriage care committee could meet regularly with the couple, taking care to be supportive, not intrusive. They could celebrate the growth of the marriage relationship with the couple and nurture the couple's spiritual life. These celebrations would be an acknowledgement of the many small events that contribute to a strong relationship. The connection between the marriage care committee and the couple would provide an opportunity within the meeting community for the couple to obtain pastoral assistance about any problem before it became overwhelming.

Another aspect of this relationship is that it would provide contacts within the meeting community who are knowledgeable about life changes that affect a marriage. Members of a care committee could assist the couple during the various stages of a marriage. Some on the committee may be parents and will be able to share with them about the effects of children on a marriage. If none on the care committee has experience with a particular life change, the committee may be able to assist the couple in connecting with meeting members who are knowledgeable or appropriate counselors.

Providing religious education, child care, and fellowship opportunities for children of all ages is an important part of support for couples with children. In addition, meetings can support couples by having books in meeting libraries about marriage, encouraging participation in marriage enrichment workshops, sharing meals in small groups, and maintaining a relationship with couples so they feel comfortable to seek assistance. Called meetings for worship at the request of a couple to celebrate their marriage on an important anniversary are one way that they and the meeting can lift up and support an enduring marriage.

Today married couples often move away from the monthly meeting that had the care for their marriage. This means that they are not close to those that have helped them with determining clearness about marrying. The meeting's responsibility for the marriage does not end when the couple moves away. If there is a meeting close to their new residence, the meeting normally writes a letter of introduction to that meeting. This letter could include a request to take the marriage under its care if the couple so wishes. If there is not a meeting close to the couple, then the marriage care committee that has worked with them could maintain long distance support for the couple.

Meetings will also need to take on the care for marriages of couples that join the meeting or begin attending. This can become a part of welcoming the couple into participation in the meeting community.



## Separation and Divorce

*Clearness committees for divorce could serve the same purposes as clearness committees for marriage. If couples in love may be blind to their incompatibilities, couples in trouble may be blind to latent possibilities in their relationship ...*

Bob Blood, 1972

In today's society many marriages result in separation or divorce. These situations present challenges to Quaker meetings as they seek to show care and support for the couple and their children.

If there is a conflict within a marriage, the couple is encouraged to seek assistance early, long before differences become irreconcilable. This may take the form of a request to meet with the marriage care committee, the establishment of a clearness committee, or counseling. Meetings are advised to recognize their role as providing spiritual support. If there is a need for professional counseling, this assistance should be sought outside the meeting. Care and counsel committees are encouraged to maintain a list of qualified counselors outside the meeting who understand Quaker values, as a reference for couples who may desire confidential professional help.

It is important that the meeting be open to both sides when there is conflict in a relationship and ensure that both partners feel welcome at meeting for worship. Members of the meeting and especially the care and counsel or marriage care committee should make every effort to keep lines of communication open between the parties and to avoid blaming the individuals. The meeting's role is to support the couple as they grow in God's love, but not to determine whether the marriage will be terminated.

When there are children involved, the Meeting should take care to ensure that they are welcome and feel the loving support of the Meeting. Be aware that children may feel bewildered, blame themselves for the difficulties their parents are experiencing, or feel caught in the middle. If a child asks for a clearness committee, this should be provided. If the child attends First Day School, the teacher is encouraged to listen to the child's concerns. If it seems advisable, the teacher may recommend counseling for the child to the parents or seek assistance from the care and counsel committee in supporting the child.

If following a period of separation, and seeking spiritual support from the meeting and professional counseling, the couple recognizes that the most loving response is a divorce, the couple may want to meet with a clearness committee to consider how the meeting can support them during the divorce proceedings and after the divorce is final. This could include practical support such as assistance with housing, jobs, and childcare, emotional support as the individuals deal with the transition, and spiritual support. If desired, the couple may request a called meeting for worship during which they each rise and ask God's support in releasing each other from their marriage commitment.

*Queries on divorce* (adapted from New England Yearly Meeting's pamphlet "Living with Oneself and Others")

*For the Meeting:*

Does the meeting have open discussions about marriage and divorce in which all can share their views?

Does the care and counsel committee actively and sensitively reach out to persons or couples who may be troubled?

If a couple so desires, can the care and counsel committee provide a list of professional counselors who understand Friends' views?

Does the care and counsel committee know divorce mediators or lawyers who will seek to avoid adversarial positions and assist the couple in finding the least detrimental and most economical means to legally end a marriage, if that is their decision?

Can the meeting as a community, reach out in love to all persons involved, accepting the couple's decision without being judgmental, helping them to grow past their animosities, and providing practical assistance (such as locating new housing, childcare arrangements, etc.)?

If the meeting finds itself too emotionally involved to help, will it consider calling on another monthly meeting, quarterly, or yearly meeting for resource persons?

*For the couple:*

Do you seek to keep God's love as a vital force in your life to help you deal with the changes that come with divorce?

Do you avoid hurting your former spouse in your relationships with others, either in or out of the meeting?

*For couples with children:*

As individuals, are you committed to the reality that you are both still parents of your children and must continue to find creative ways of living this responsibility?

Are you mindful of your children's pain and suffering? Can you avoid both shutting your children out of your own pain and leaning on them too much?

Are you mindful of the needs of your children for a continuing loving relationship with each parent?

Are you mindful of the special love between children and grandparents or extended family and do you endeavor to further strengthen these ties?

*For relatives:*

If you have a warm relationship with an in-law can you preserve it with patience and creativity during and after the separation without exerting undue pressure on anyone involved?

Do you give loving support and encouragement, and avoid giving unwelcome advice?

Are you mindful of the needs of each member of the couple?

Sources for quotes:

- p. 1, "Marriage being an ordinance affecting all the relations of life..." *Rules of Discipline and Advices of Illinois Yearly Meeting of Friends* (1878) p. 53; (1892) p. 53.
- p. 2, "Illinois Yearly Meeting is aware that there is great diversity...": Illinois Yearly Meeting (1974) *The Minutes and Accompanying Documents*, Saturday Morning minute #9, p. 3.
- p. 6, Traditional wording of marriage vows: from *Book of Discipline of the Religious Society of Friends, adopted by Illinois Yearly Meeting*, 1927, p.102
- p. 6, Non-traditional wording for vows: modified from Southeast Yearly Meeting, *Faith and Practice* (2005), p. 6.
- p. 6, Traditional wording for certificate: from *Rules of Discipline and Advices of Illinois Yearly Meeting* (1878), pp. 57-58
- p. 7, "Marriage is recognized to be not an easy bond...": Comfort, William Wistar (1941) *Just Among Friends: The Quaker Way of Life*, New York: The Macmillan Co., p. 49.
- p. 9, "Clearness committees for divorce could serve the same purposes...": Blood, Bob, (1972) 'Divorce in Friends Meeting', *Friends Journal*, November 1, 1972, pp. 574-575.
- p. 9, Queries on separation and divorce: adapted from New England Yearly Meeting Care and counsel Committee (2001) *Living with Oneself and Others*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., ch. 8 (unpaginated).