

II. Faith // B. Life of the Spirit//10. Home Life

B. Quaker Marriage

Early Friends believed that marriage was based upon a spiritual leading from God. Therefore no priest or minister was needed to sanctify the marriage. To this day Friends marry each other without an intermediary.

For the right joining in marriage is the work of the Lord only and not the priest's or the magistrate's; 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

It is earnestly advised that individuals with a leading to marry engage in spiritual discernment in reaching their decision. Recognizing that life can be joyful and unexpectedly challenging, a Quaker couple can ground their relationship in the life of the Spirit and be supported by the meeting community.

In the Quaker meeting for marriage, a couple rises in a meeting for worship and promise with Divine assistance to be loving and faithful as long as they both shall live. As in other meetings for worship, a wedding includes an opportunity for Spirit-led vocal ministry arising from the silence and deep listening to the Spirit that lies behind each message.

From the beginning, Friends have emphasized equality of marriage partners. The roles and responsibilities of each partner within a marriage may change over time and may differ from couple to couple.

We thank God, then for the pleasures, joys and triumphs of marriage; 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 of 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, 1959

Baltimore Yearly Meeting Friends today remain committed to the principle of marriage equality between two partners. In addition, nearly all of our monthly meetings now embrace marriage of couples without regard to gender. We acknowledge that leadings to marry are not bound by gender, sex, or sexual orientation. We affirm the right of all adult couples to explore their leadings to marry.

See Section III (Quaker Marriage Procedure) for specific information about Quaker marriages as well as a discussion on marriages in distress.

III. Practices and Procedures//B. The Monthly Meeting //6. Marriage Under the Care of the Meeting -- renamed "The Quaker Marriage Procedure (moving Appendix F up to this section so that all aspects of marriage are located in one place for ease of reference)

6. Quaker Marriage Procedure

Those considering marriage under the care of the meeting should closely review the procedures recommended below to gain a clear understanding of the process. See Section 10 (below) for an overview of responsibilities of the couple, the meeting clerk, the clearness committee, and the marriage committee.

1. Questions to Consider When Requesting Marriage Under the Care of the Meeting

Friends considering marriage under the care of the meeting should first review and discuss the following questions.

- a. What values and beliefs do we hold in common? On what matters do we differ? Do we know each other's habits, likes, and dislikes? Are we ready to make adjustments and meet, with kindness and understanding, areas of possible conflict?
- b. Do we feel spiritually led to marry? Are we open to seeking Divine assistance both when things are going well and when we encounter difficulties? What are our plans for nurturing the spiritual basis of our marriage? Do we understand and have sympathy for one another's religious beliefs?
- c. Do we see each other and treat each other as equals? Do we have the willingness to listen to each other and to strive for open communication?
- d. How do we feel about each other's economic and cultural background? How do we react to each other's parents, children, friends, and relatives? Do we share interests which we can enjoy together? Do we respect each other's individual interests? How will we balance the needs of our marriage with our friendships and responsibilities outside the home, such as work, volunteer activities, and education?
- e. Will our professional or family obligations mean that we are apart for short or long periods of time? How will we handle the challenges of these separations?
- f. Do we share each other's attitudes on earning, spending and saving money, and the handling of finances and debt? How are family responsibilities to be shared? Are there prior obligations—legal, financial or both—that need to be met? If this relationship will not be recognized legally, how will we protect each other's legal rights?
- g. For those with prior partnerships: Do we have unfinished emotional business with our previous partner(s) that can productively be brought to completion? Are there failures whose acknowledgment might open the way to apologies and forgiveness, the healing of wounds, and new beginnings?
- h. Have we explored our attitudes toward sexuality and monogamy? Have we discussed how we will express our individual sexualities in our marriage? What desires do we have in common and where do we differ? What are our opinions on contraception and abortion?

- i. Have we explored our attitudes and visions for family life, including how many children we want, if any, and whether we might consider adoption or foster care? How might our family reflect Friends' testimonies of simplicity and of stewardship of the environment? What are our expectations about how we will raise, discipline, and educate our children?
- j. For those with children already: How will we co-parent with our children's other parents going forward? How do we envision relationships among children we may already have and our new partner? How do we envision that any children we may have together will relate with our other children?
- k. Have we considered together how we will work to reconcile inevitable differences? Are we willing to make a strong commitment to permanence in our marriage? Are we open to seeking outside help if such support seems warranted?
- l. Do we know each other well enough to have considered all of the above questions frankly and openly? If not, should we wait—six months, a year—before proceeding with marriage?

When the couple have seriously considered the above questions and others arising from them, the following additional questions should be considered before asking for marriage under the care of the meeting:

- m. Why are we asking for marriage under the care of the meeting? What do we anticipate our relationship with the meeting to be in our life together? Are we aware that care of our marriage by the meeting involves a continuing concern for our life together and the values established in our home? Will we welcome the continuing concern of the meeting?
- n. Are we clear that we are ready to make promises in the presence of God and of our family and friends to be loving and faithful partners as long as we both shall live?

Once a decision has been made to marry under the care of the meeting the following questions might be considered for planning the wedding.

- o. What traditions and beliefs (religious, cultural, familial) are important to you? Do you want to incorporate them into the traditional Quaker ceremony?
- p. Who (family, friends, community) do you want to include in the process of planning how your wedding will be accomplished? What traditions, beliefs, and values might they hope to see represented as you formalize your commitment in the wedding? How might they differ from the traditional Quaker ceremony? How will you work to reconcile any difference of tradition, belief, or values that might arise?
- q. Who (family, friends, community) do you want present at your wedding as participants? What roles do you see for them? Do the people you are including in the process of planning your wedding have feelings about this?
- r. Do you want to hold a reception following the wedding ceremony? Note that typically alcoholic beverages are not served at meeting houses.

2. Seeking Monthly Meeting Approval

The couple write to the meeting under whose care they wish to be married. See Section 10a, Responsibilities of the Persons to be Married, for suggested content of the letter. The proposed wedding date should be at least three to six months in the future to allow the meeting time to fulfill its responsibilities. The letter of request should be addressed to the meeting in care of its clerk, who forwards the request to the appropriate committee (usually pastoral care or care and counsel), which will name a clearness committee of usually two or three members. Some meetings establish the clearness committee at business meeting.

3. The Clearness Process

As it relates to Quaker marriage, the term “clearness” historically referred to clearness from other marriage commitments. Today, the marriage clearness committee also explores with the couple what it takes to achieve the permanence and satisfaction of a committed, loving relationship, and the extent to which the couple is prepared for the dedication and constancy such a relationship requires.

The clearness committee meets privately with the couple in a spirit of loving concern as many times as necessary. The clearness committee members should ask thoughtful questions, listen carefully, and leave space for worship. If concerns for the couple arise during the clearness process, it is important for committee members to speak candidly, recognizing that failure to speak truth in kindness is to risk possible suffering.

The clearness committee does its best to confirm in the couple a true leading to marry. If the clearness committee is satisfied that there are no obstacles, it reports back to the standing committee that appointed it on the readiness of the couple for marriage.

Specific responsibilities of the clearness committee are outlined in Section 10c, Responsibilities of the Clearness Committee.

4. Monthly Meeting Approval

A recommendation that the couple be married under the care of the meeting is presented by the standing committee to business meeting for approval. Some monthly meetings require that the request be held over for a month after the first presentation to the business meeting.

5. The Marriage Committee

The marriage committee is responsible for ensuring that the wedding is carried out with dignity, reverence, and simplicity, in the manner of Friends. Those appointed also accept personal responsibility for upholding the meeting’s continuing concern for the marriage, and, as possible, for remaining in touch with the couple after the wedding and reaching out from time to time. Marriage partners who are not members of the meeting should be welcomed into the life of the

meeting and be invited to attend meetings for worship and business and other meeting activities. See below Section 10d, Responsibilities of the Marriage Committee below.

6. The Marriage Promises

The traditional Quaker marriage promise is:

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

The couple should review and discuss these promises to decide if they wish to modify them. Any significant changes to the marriage promises should be reviewed with the clearness committee and/or marriage committee for approval.

7. The Marriage Certificate

The form below reflects the traditional wording of the marriage certificate. It may be modified as the couple wish to reflect their terminology for one another. At a minimum, the certificate includes the full names of the couple; name and location (city and state) of the monthly meeting; date of the wedding; statement of the promises exchanged; signatures of the couple; and the signatures of all in attendance.

A couple wishing for a certificate with substantially different wording from the standard form below should make this known as early as possible to the clearness committee and/or marriage committee. If this committee feels the changes are substantive, the changes should be brought to the attention of the appropriate standing committee of the monthly meeting for approval.

A Friends' marriage certificate is typically prepared by hand by someone with calligraphic skills using archival paper and permanent ink.

Whereas [full name] of [City, State], [son/daughter/child] of [parent name] and [parent name] of [City, State] and [full name] of [City, State], [daughter/son/child] of [parent name] and [parent name] of [City, State], having declared their intentions to marry each other to _____ Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends held at [City, State], according to the good order used among them, this meeting allowed their proposed marriage.

Now this is to certify that for the accomplishment of their marriage, this ___ day of the ___ month, in the year ___, they, [full name] and [full name], appeared in a meeting for worship of the Religious Society of Friends, held at _____ Meeting, and [first name], taking [first name] by the hand, did on this solemn occasion declare that [he/she/they] took [first name], to be [his/her/their] [partner/spouse/husband/wife] promising with Divine assistance to be unto [him/her/them] a loving and faithful [partner/spouse/husband/wife] so long as they both shall live; and then in the same

assembly [first name] did in like manner declare that [he/she/they] took [him/her/them], [first name], to be [his/her/their] [partner/spouse/husband/wife], promising with Divine assistance to be unto [him/her/them] a loving and faithful [partner/spouse/husband/wife] so long as they both shall live. And moreover, they did as further confirmation thereof, then and there, to this certificate set their hands.

[spaces for signatures of couple, with the names they will use after the wedding]

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

8. Customary Sequence of Events at a Quaker Wedding

The meeting for marriage is a traditional meeting for worship with some programmed elements. The usual sequence of events (subject to change by request of the couple and consent of the marriage committee) is as follows:

- a. If music is desired, it may be played or sung during the period when people are gathering.
- b. At the hour appointed for the start of the meeting, the marriage committee and the wedding party enter and take their seats.
- c. After a few moments of settling, a designated person rises to explain the purpose of the meeting, its nature as a Quaker meeting for worship, and of a Quaker wedding specifically (see 9. Introducing Weddings, below, for suggested wording).
- d. The meeting then settles into silent worship.
- e. Following a period of silence, as long or as short as the couple is led to observe, the couple stand, face each other and join hands. Each recites to the other their promises in a loud clear voice so all may hear.
- f. If there are rings, the couple exchange these after their promises. A kiss is often exchanged at this time.
- g. The couple sit down and the marriage certificate table is brought before them for signature.
- h. The signed certificate is then read aloud by a designated person to the meeting in its entirety, including the signatures just appended.
- i. The certificate table is then moved away.
- j. The meeting settles again into a period of worship during which those who are moved to speak do so. The meeting is closed by the designated person.
- k. After the wedding company withdraws, all wedding guests (including children) sign the certificate under the supervision of designated persons. If desired, spaces may be reserved for the signatures of the wedding company, marriage committee, and family.

9. Introducing Weddings

Some meetings have used the following language in introducing the meeting for marriage. Friends are urged to take it as a guide, making whatever modifications seem appropriate.

Friends, We are gathered here today in a meeting for worship to witness the marriage of _____ and _____. They have asked me to say a few words about what will happen, especially for those who have not experienced a Quaker meeting for worship.

When Friends gather for worship, they come together sure in the knowledge that God, also called by some the Inner Light, the Truth, Love, or the Spirit of Christ, will be with us. You are invited to join us in the silent power of this corporate worship.

Because your presence and attention are requested, and to avoid distracting others, we ask that you not take photographs during the worship. There will be plenty of time later for that.

_____ and _____ have asked me to extend a special welcome to young children, who are encouraged to stay with us as long as is comfortable for them and their parents. Whenever they may prefer it, children are welcome to join in the child care, which is being provided _____ [insert location] _____.

When these comments are finished, we will settle together into a period of silent worship. When they are ready, _____ and _____ will stand and, facing each other, exchange their marriage promises. In the manner of Friends, they will join themselves in marriage without the intercession of a minister or other official. After the promises are spoken, the marriage certificate will be brought for them to sign. When _____ and _____ have signed the certificate, it will be read aloud to us and returned to its place.

At that time we will enter again into a period of corporate worship, opening our hearts to the joy of this occasion and reflecting upon our hopes and prayers for _____ and for _____ and for their life together. Out of this second period of silent worship, it may be that some are led by the Spirit to offer a message out of the silence. If you are so led today please stand and speak loudly and clearly so all may hear allowing a period of silence after any previous message so it may settle. Please do not hurry; we will have enough time. Once the time is right, worship will be closed by shaking hands. At that time please remain in your seats until you are invited to sign the wedding certificate.

Let us now enter into the silence with _____ and _____ with joy and expectation.

10. Overview of Responsibilities

To promote clarity and mutual understanding, the duties and responsibilities of the several persons involved are outlined separately below. These outlines should be reviewed in conjunction with the preceding text.

a. Responsibilities of the Persons to be Married

- 1) Write a letter, signed by both persons, to the monthly meeting under whose care they wish to be married. The letter at a minimum should say:

We intend to marry and request marriage under the care of ___ Meeting. We have discussed the “Questions to Consider Prior to Requesting Marriage Under the Care of the Meeting.” Our proposed marriage date is ___/___/___ . (The proposed date should be at least three to six months in the future).

- 2) Meet with a clearness committee to explore their leading to marry. This may involve one or more meetings.
- 3) Review traditional marriage promises and discuss any proposed changes.
- 4) Identify persons that they suggest might serve on the marriage committee.
- 5) Mail out invitations only *after* approval has been granted by the monthly meeting.
- 6) Meet with the marriage committee to discuss plans for the wedding.
- 7) Identify persons to introduce and conclude the meeting for worship and to read the marriage certificate.
- 8) Have language of the promises and marriage certificate approved by the standing committee or monthly meeting.
- 9) Have the certificate prepared in ample time before the marriage.
- 10) Become informed, with the assistance of the marriage committee, of all legal requirements and forms needed in the state in which the marriage is to take place.
- 11) Arrange to secure the marriage license and provide it to the marriage committee prior to the wedding.
- 12) Commit to memory the promises to be made.
- 13) Sign the marriage certificate after the promises have been made.

b. Responsibilities of the Monthly Meeting Clerk

- 1) Present the letter of request to marry to the appropriate standing committee (usually pastoral care or care and counsel) at the earliest opportunity. (That committee will assure that a committee for clearness is appointed.)
- 2) Arrange for presentation by the standing committee of the clearness committee’s report at the next monthly meeting for business following receipt of the report.
- 3) After the report has been accepted and the wedding allowed by the monthly meeting, ensure that the meeting name a marriage committee.
- 4) Inform the couple that the wedding has been allowed and that they should next meet with the marriage committee.
- 5) Ensure that the marriage committee reports to the meeting for business following the wedding.

c. Responsibilities of the Clearness Committee

- 1) Arrange to meet with the couple privately, in a spirit of loving concern, at least once, and as many more times as is deemed necessary.
- 2) Learn whether both are clear of any other commitment that is inconsistent with the intended marriage.
- 3) Discuss their responses to the “Questions to Consider When Requesting Marriage Under the Care of the Meeting.”

- 4) Make sure that the welfare and rights of any children by a former marriage have been properly considered and legally secured.
- 5) Review the conduct of a Quaker wedding, including customary wording of the promises and the marriage certificate.
- 6) Discuss the Quaker regard for reverence, dignity, and simplicity in the meeting for marriage and reception.
- 7) Discuss the specific date, time, and location of the wedding to be included in the report to meeting for business.
- 8) Explain the functions of the marriage committee with whom the couple will discuss wedding arrangements, including that the role of this committee is to provide continuing care for the couple following the marriage.
- 9) Obtain suggestions from the couple of names for the marriage committee to be included in the report to the monthly meeting. There should be no fewer than four persons on the marriage committee, of whom at least half should be members of the meeting.
- 10) Report to the standing committee that appointed it regarding the readiness of the couple for marriage, discussing any proposed substantive changes to the promises.

The committee (usually pastoral care or care and counsel) that named the clearness committee then presents a recommendation to business meeting that the marriage be allowed including the proposed date, time, and location for the wedding and suggested members of the marriage committee.

d. Responsibilities of the Marriage Committee

- 1) Arrange to meet with the couple in a timely fashion.
- 2) Make clear their availability to the couple to help them before, during, and after the wedding with ongoing responsibility for continuing care for the marriage.
- 3) At the first meeting of the committee plan a rehearsal date, ideally with all members of the wedding party.
- 4) Make sure that the wedding site is reserved for the rehearsal and wedding; make sure that the reception site is reserved.
- 5) Review Section 6: “Customary Series of Events at a Quaker Marriage Ceremony.”
- 6) Review and approve the promises the couple will exchange at the wedding and the language of the marriage certificate, making sure that the promises are exactly reflected in the certificate.
- 7) Discuss the Quaker regard for reverence, dignity, and simplicity in the meeting for marriage and reception. If the couple desires to include elements from other faith traditions assure they are in keeping with the simplicity of a meeting for worship. Discuss proposed decorations, music, or any arrangements desired by the couple. Remind the couple that photographs are not to be taken during the meeting for worship. Express the meeting’s hope that simplicity will also be observed at any reception held.
- 8) Determine who will introduce and conclude the meeting. Discuss what will be communicated by this person at the beginning of the meeting for worship. See Section 6 “Introducing Weddings” above.

- 9) Determine who will read the certificate. (This person does not need to be a member of the meeting or of this committee.) The person selected to read the certificate should have an opportunity to see and read it in advance.
- 10) Discuss whether or not there will be a handout that provides an overview of the Quaker meeting for marriage, and, if so, how it will be produced and distributed.
- 11) Decide upon any special seating arrangements, if desired, for families and friends of the couple.
- 12) Be aware of local laws related to Quaker marriages and communicate this to the couple. Make sure that the marriage license and wedding certificate have been secured, that needed signatures can be obtained on the license, and that all legal requirements will be met.
- 13) Ensure that weights for the certificate, pens with permanent ink, and a portable table are available for the certificate.
- 14) Appoint two persons to assist those present to sign the certificate after the wedding.
- 15) Attend the rehearsal.
- 16) After the wedding
 - a) Arrange for the care of the marriage certificate, give it to the meeting recorder to copy for the meeting records, retrieve it from the recorder, and return it to the couple.
 - b) Obtain the needed signatures on the marriage license and mail or deliver it to the proper authorities.
 - c) Report to the business meeting whether the marriage has been suitably accomplished, whether legal requirements were satisfied, and any name changes resulting from the marriage.

11. What Does it Mean for Marriages to be Under the Care of the Meeting

The following queries may be helpful for meetings and marriage committees:

- 1) What does it mean for the meeting to take a marriage under its care? What are the meeting's responsibilities after the wedding? How often do members of the couple's marriage committee reach out to them after the wedding?
- 2) What is the responsibility of others in meeting who were not on the marriage committee?
- 3) How do marriages between members affect the meeting? How does the meeting balance holding the marriages of members as both personal, intimate relationships between partners and as relationships that affect the community as a whole?
- 4) How does the meeting care for marriages established before the married partners join the meeting?

12. Marriages Not Under the Care of the Meeting

Marriage of members elsewhere

When meeting members are married elsewhere, it is requested that they inform the meeting of their marriage. The meeting should then assign members to contact the newly married couple to express the meeting's continuing care for the couple.

Marriages of Friends from other Meetings

Sometimes meetings will be asked to host a wedding for Friends from other meetings who wish to be married there, but to have the marriage remain under the care of their home meeting. Good communication between the two meetings can help ensure an appropriate wedding.

Marriage of non-members

Non-members may request marriage at a meeting using the Friends meeting for marriage ("in the manner of Friends"). Meetings are encouraged to consider in advance if they are willing and able to offer this. Some meetings require that at least one of the persons to be married be a member or attender well known to the community. Meetings should also investigate the legal aspects of marriage of non-members. The couple should be fully aware of the nature and procedures for a Friends meeting for marriage.

13. Marriages in Distress

Many marriages end 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 their marriage committee, to meet with a clearness committee, or receive 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. The meeting is encouraged to maintain a list of qualified counselors who understand Quaker values, as a reference for couples who may desire professional help.

It is important that the meeting supports both people and that both feel welcome at meeting for worship. Members of the meeting, especially those who serve on committees that provide pastoral care, should strive to keep open lines of communication, avoid blaming individuals, and help each individual act with integrity. Confidentiality is essential.

The meeting's role is to support everyone in the family (including children). When there are children involved, the meeting should take care to ensure that they are welcome and feel the loving and practical 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, ultimately, the couple decides to divorce, the couple may want to meet with a clearness committee to consider how the meeting can support them.

Queries for the couple:

- 1) Are you open to seeking spiritual support through a clearness process or asking for professional help when difficulties or distress become evident?
- 2) Do you seek to keep the Spirit as a vital force in your life to help you deal with the changes that come with separation or divorce?
- 3) Do you avoid hurting your former spouse through your relationships with others, either in or out of the meeting?

Queries for couples with children:

- 1) 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 fulfilling this responsibility?
- 2) Are you mindful of your children's need to continue a loving relationship with each parent?
- 3) Are you mindful of your children's pain and suffering?
- 4) Can you avoid both shutting your children out of your own pain and leaning on them too much?
- 5) Are you mindful of the special love between children and grandparents or extended family, and do you endeavor to further strengthen these ties?

Queries for Meetings:

- 1) Does the meeting actively and sensitively reach out to married persons or couples who may be troubled?
- 2) Does the meeting recognize that strong emotions may lead to different perceptions of what is true? Is it able to honor emotional truth without siding with anyone?
- 3) Is the meeting prepared to offer a clearness or support committee if requested by the couple?
- 4) Is the meeting providing ongoing spiritual and practical support affording stability and continuity to children during this difficult time?
- 5) If the meeting finds itself too emotionally involved to help, will it consider calling on another monthly meeting, its quarterly meeting, or yearly meeting for resource persons?