

Marriage in Ann Arbor Friends Meeting

**A Guide for Those Inquiring
and for Meeting Participation**

In the true marriage relationship the independence of husband and wife [life partners] are equal, their dependence mutual, and their obligations reciprocal.

Lucretia Mott, 1855, Philadelphia

* * *

Love is the will to nurture life and growth in oneself and in another.... Love is personal; it is the sacred trust of living things. Likewise, love is neither need nor dependency.... It is freeing; it acknowledges the separateness of the beloved. It treasures the unique otherness of the beloved that is each one's contribution to the relationship. Love calls for submission and sacrifice. It does not seek to possess, but rather to empty itself in nurture of the loved one.

Donald A. Green, 1982, in Britain Yearly Meeting
Quaker Faith & Practice, 22.42.

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Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by, but that all, with the measure of light which is pure and holy, may be guided; and so in the light walking and abiding, these things may be fulfilled in the Spirit, not from the letter, for the letter killeth but the Spirit giveth life.

Postscript to an epistle issued by a meeting of the elders at Balby, 1656

The preparation for and celebration of a marriage is a process to which a Friends Meeting joyfully devotes considerable energy, time, and care. The Society of Friends believes that practice of “inward spiritual grace” is more significant than “outward and visible signs.”

The process of preparing for a Friends wedding is a seeking and worshiping experience. Questions will be explored on practical and spiritual levels. The procedures that are outlined below may seem unwieldy to some, but they have become procedures Friends follow in the hope of fostering relationships that grow in the Light. Divine guidance and striving for simplicity and truth are expected on the part of the couple, their committee(s), and the Meeting.

I. Before Any Formal Requests Are Made

A. *Couple Considerations*: Each member of the couple should have worked toward the development of self-awareness and together they should seek mutual understanding about their expectations of marriage. Excellent questions for personal and joint development are presented in *Living with Oneself and Others*.¹

B. *Relationship with the Ann Arbor Meeting*: Consideration should be given by the couple to its relationship with the Ann Arbor Meeting, the Religious Society of Friends, and the Quaker practices of exchanging vows within a silent meeting for worship. The wedding may be either of two types:

1. If a wedding “in the manner of Friends” is desired, this can be arranged with the assistance of a few individuals from the Meeting. The ceremony can be arranged as the couple desires. The Meeting-house’s physical facilities can be reserved; legal requirements can be worked out in advance with the advice of the Ministry and Counsel Committee and cooperative clergy.

¹ *Living with Oneself and Others*, New England Yearly Meeting, 2001, available from Friends General Conference QuakerBooks.

2. If marriage “under the care of the Ann Arbor Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends” is desired, then the procedures below become appropriate. The couple is expected to await Monthly Meeting approval before sending out invitations and to join in the process in a spirit of openness over the period of two or more months required.

C. Continuing Acquaintance with the Meeting: Membership in the Society of Friends is not required, but familiarity with and appreciation of the manner and spirit of worship that prevail in a Quaker meeting seem necessary to the full participation of each of the partners at their own wedding. Since marriage requires considerable dedication by numerous members, it is to be hoped that a relationship with the Meeting has preceded a request for oversight of a wedding.

If the couple is not well known to the Meeting community, there might be few Friends at the wedding; the time before the wedding may be useful for enhancing relationships between members of the Meeting and the couple. The caring function of the Meeting community grows out of continuing relationships. This is a mutual responsibility.

II. Requesting the Meeting to Hold the Marriage under its Care

“Where there is genuine tenderness, an openness to responsibility, and the seed of commitment, God is surely not shut out. Can we not say that God can enter any relationship in which there is a measure of selfless love? – and is not every generalization we make qualified by this?” (*Toward A Quaker View of Sex*, Britain Yearly Meeting, 1963)

It is the sense of the Meeting that Ann Arbor Friends Meeting provides a clearness and oversight process for couples in the Meeting, whether of different sex or the same sex. If it is so recommended by the clearness committee and approved by the Meeting for Business, the Meeting witnesses and celebrates the couple’s commitment to each other, takes their relationship under its care, and gives its ongoing support. (*Ann Arbor Friends Meeting Handbook*, page 42, abridged.)

A. *Letter of Request*: A couple asking to be married under the care of the Meeting writes a letter to the Clerk. Preparing to write this letter should include reading sections in the *Handbook of the Ann Arbor Friends Meeting* and books of *Faith and Practice*.² The letter should include information concerning membership in Meetings or other religious bodies. It is advised that parental approval be indicated with the application if appropriate. If the couple desires particular members of the Meeting to serve on their Committees, these names should be mentioned in the letter.³

B. *Considerations by Ministry and Counsel Committee*: The Clerk reads the letter in monthly meeting for business and transmits the letter to the Committee on Ministry and Counsel, which considers the request. If, for any reason, there are “stops in the mind” of some on Ministry and Counsel, careful communication should take place between that committee and the couple. If Ministry and Counsel reaches unity, a Committee on Clearness, with an appropriate convener, is nominated. The Committee on Ministry and Counsel ascertains their willingness of individuals to serve on the Committee on Clearness, and advises them on their duties and responsibilities. The letter from the couple and the nominees for the Committee on Clearness are then read at monthly meeting for business and approval is sought for that Committee to function on behalf of the Meeting.

C. *The Committee on Clearness*: In nominating the Committee on Clearness, the Ministry and Counsel Committee is encouraged to include some who are very familiar with the Society of Friends and what it means by care for the intended wedding and the couple intending marriage. Consideration should be given to any names suggested by the couple. Some of these may be asked later to serve on the Committee on Arrangements for the wedding. The two Committees serve separate functions but may be composed of the same persons.⁴

² Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, *Faith and Practice*, 1998, pp. 47-56, for instance.

³ See sections III and IV below to understand the roles of each committee.

⁴ See section III (C)

The Committee should expect to meet with the couple one or more times and to meet subsequently without the couple to assess their unity on clearness before developing a recommendation to the meeting for business. The Committee should choose a person to report to meeting for business after a decision as to clearness or lack of clearness has been reached. The Ministry and Counsel Committee stands ready to assist if asked.

III. The Clearness Committee Process

The explorations by the couple with their Committee on Clearness are meant to bring everyone involved into a sense of clarity about expectations, processes for coping with the unexpected, and resources – both spiritual and pragmatic – for support or renewed vision.

Questions on the relationship need to be dealt with sensitively and without a sense of hurry. The couple *may* be interested in the views and experiences of members of the Committee, but the emphasis should be on the *couple finding its way*, not on gratuitous advice.⁵

A. *Questions for Exploring Clearness*: Questions such as the following should be addressed seriously by the couple, and the Committee should encourage serious discussion at as many sessions as seem appropriate.

- What are our expectations of marriage? How do we feel our present relationship will be changed?
- Can I articulate my feelings? Do I know my own strengths and weaknesses? Can we talk about them with one another? Are our ideas of humor compatible? How do we deal with difference?

⁵ A number of these questions are from the New England Yearly Meeting, *Living with Oneself and Others*, chapters III & IV, including queries for both the couple and the Meeting. The book covers more than just marriage.

- How do I hope to be living in ten years? Are our interests, goals, and lifestyle commitments similar? What levels of agreement have we reached about our separate and mutual use of time? Of space? Of money? How will we distinguish between necessities and luxuries?
- What do you and I think about the “traditional” masculine and feminine roles? Can we both see ourselves moving between the worlds of home-making and wage-earning as the needs change? Who will do the cooking, earning, laundry? Who will take care of the car, scrub the bathroom, take out the trash, pick up the mess? Why?
- How well do we know one another’s families? How do images and dependencies from earlier relationships affect expectations for our relationship?
- Have we shared expectations about the number or absence of children? Have we considered child-rearing practices?
- Might cultural, temperamental, or religious differences cause conflicts? How have we dealt with conflicts that have already occurred? (If we have had none, the wedding may be premature.) How does each of us anticipate that the family and friends of the other will influence our marriage relationship?
- Have we shared our own and our family’s health history? What is my attitude toward illness? My own? Someone else’s illness?
- Am I willing to give attention, patience, sense of humor, and openness necessary to a good sexual relationship? How do I feel about emotional and sexual fidelity in marriage?
- Do I expect my spouse to be “all things” to me? Am I willing to resist the tendency to control my spouse? Am I able to delight in your individuality? Do I look for and revere that of God in you and can I be a continuing factor in the expression of God’s love for you?

B. Legal Considerations

- Are both persons free of previous marriage commitments?
- If either party has been previously married, where and when was the divorce or death recorded? If there are children, what are the legal, practical, and emotional aspects of this new marriage for them? For each partner?
- Have all debts been disclosed and equitable arrangements been made to complete payment?

C. Report to Meeting for Business: Once the Committee on Clearness feels it has explored adequately with the couple, a session should continue without the couple present. The Committee should seek unity on “clearness” that marriage under the care of the Monthly Meeting should proceed. If there is not unity, other courses of action should be discussed with the couple. (The couple’s readiness for marriage to one another might be clear, while approval for that marriage under the care of the Meeting might not yet be clear.)

If the Committee on Clearness reaches unity, it prepares to report to Monthly Meeting. The names of those willing to serve on an Arrangements Committee should be obtained.⁶ The Clerk should be asked to put the report on the agenda. The couple should plan to attend the meeting for business.

The reporter for the Committee on Clearness acquaints the Meeting with the couple, may summarize the clearness process, and offers the Committee’s recommendation. If the report is favorable and is accepted, the Clerk asks for the appointment by the Meeting of a Committee on Arrangements for the wedding.

⁶ Any names requested by the couple should be included. See Section II (A).

IV. The Arrangements Committee ... Preparing for the Wedding

A. *Vows*: The vows to be exchanged should be an early and important focus for discussion between the couple and the Committee. Since the vows are usually memorized, and since they will appear on the certificate (see below, Section C), an early agreement on their specific wording is essential. Many couples write their own vows, in which case it is advised that the vows reflect and maintain the spirit of those published in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's *Faith and Practice*:

"In the presence of God and these our Friends, I take thee _____ to be my (wife/husband/spouse), promising with Divine assistance to be unto thee a loving and faithful (wife/husband/spouse) as long as we both shall live."⁷

B. *Wedding and Reception Plans*: The time, place, and major style of the wedding should be clarified early so that invitations, space, reservations, and appropriate arrangements for the reception can be accomplished. These plans should be discussed with the Committee, whose function is to represent the Meeting's oversight of the wedding and reception (if there is to be one). Committee roles at the wedding are discussed below. The use (or non-use) of rings, candles, or other religious symbols may be significant for personal reasons; these details should be shared between couple and Committee along with understanding of Friends' testimonies on simplicity and truth.

C. *Certificate*: The Certificate of Marriage is a significant part of the ceremony, as a record of the community of spirit gathered around the couple. Within ample time before the wedding, a certificate should be ordered. The Committee can advise on the design and recommend calligraphers for the certificate, but obtaining it is the responsibility of the couple.⁸

⁷ Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, *Faith and Practice*, 1998, p. 53

⁸ QuakerBooks sells a printed certificate with appropriate blanks (www.quakerbooks.org/marriage_certificate_partially_preprinted.php); local calligraphers can be recommended by the Meeting. Note that the QuakerBooks certificate language assumes heterosexual pairs.

With appropriate adaptations, the model offered in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's *Faith and Practice* should give the couple and the Committee adequate guidance for reaching unity on words, meanings, and their correspondence to the lives of those involved.

D. Involvement of Specific Persons: If many who are expected to attend the wedding are unacquainted with a Friends' wedding, it is important to have some Friend interpret clearly, to all, at the outset of the meeting, the manner and meaning of a Friends' wedding. This should include:

- The reasons for silence and absence of an intermediary
- The order of events
- The invitation to oral sharing of inspirations, encouragements, love within the silence following the couple's exchange of vows
- Identification of the closure of meeting by handshaking; either the meeting closer or the person who reads the certificate should explain that all those present are expected to sign at the rise of the ceremony.

The couple may wish to include a brief explanation with their invitation, similar to the following:

A Friends wedding is a meeting for worship. As with the regular weekly gathering, the setting is an expectant silence and togetherness. Within the silent meeting, the couple will rise, speak vows, and sign the marriage certificate. The meeting continues based on silence, during which those present may share in the ceremony by speaking if they feel moved to do so. After the meeting, all those in attendance will be asked to sign the certificate. Photography is not appropriate during the meeting, but is welcome before and afterward.

The couple may want to ask each member of the Committee to perform a specific role. Some of the functions usually needed and normally handled by the Committee are listed below. (If specific family or friends would be appropriate, that can be planned with the Committee.)

- Locate the following: low table for the couple to sign the certificate, a higher table for others, a smooth-writing permanent black pen, weights to flatten the certificate
- Oversee ventilation, bench moving, lights, opening and closing of the building, clean-up. The person assigned this function may assist ushers in welcoming guests.
- Bring the table and certificate to the couple once they have exchanged their vows
- Read the certificate aloud for the hearing of everyone at the meeting
- Close meeting with a handshake
- Oversee the signing of the certificate. The Arrangements Committee and families of the couple may be asked to sign at the top. If congestion occurs, or as families attempt to sign near one another, the person “in charge” helps the signing go smoothly.

E. State of Michigan Requirements: If the union is recognized by the State, the marriage license must be obtained by the couple and delivered to the Clerk before the wedding. Both copies should be signed by the Clerk and one other witness (usually the convener of the Arrangements Committee), and the County’s copy prepared for mailing immediately following the ceremony.⁹ A member of the Arrangements Committee may be asked to hold on to the certificate and the couple’s copy of the license for delivery to the couple at a later date, when they have settled.

⁹ There is no special license in Michigan, as there is in some states, for a Friends’ wedding. The Clerk’s signature, plus the phrase “Clerk, Ann Arbor Meeting” should be signed and the following note appended: *This is a Friends marriage, solemnized in accordance with Section 551.17, Compiled Laws 1948.* The passage refers to Michigan Statutes Annotated, Section 25.12: (Effect of chapter on denominational modes of solemnization; R.S. 1846, Title XX, Chapter 83, #18.) “Sec. 17: The preceding provisions of this chapter, so far as they relate to the manner of solemnizing marriages, shall not affect marriages among the people called Friends or Quakers, nor marriages among people of any other particular denomination, having, as such, any particular mode of solemnizing marriages; but such marriages may be solemnized in the manner heretofore used and practiced in their respective societies or denominations.”

V. The Wedding

A. *Rehearsal* for the wedding is highly recommended – moving close family, each “active” participant, and the “equipment” to and through their expected places. Not only will the ceremony be accomplished more smoothly, but the principals are likely to be more relaxed having rehearsed the motions, although not the emotions.

B. *Greeting Guests, the Meeting for Marriage*: There should be some plans for greeting people at the door and introducing them to seating arrangements. Guests may be asked to enter quietly. Often certain bench space is reserved for family of the couple and perhaps their Committee or others who will take active parts in the ceremony. The seating of these people would indicate that silence is appropriate. This may be the moment for Friends’ explanation of the order of the meeting. When the couple enter – following attendants, if there are any, they sit facing the assembly. The meeting for worship called for the special purpose of this wedding is underway. (See Philadelphia Yearly Meeting’s *Faith and Practice* on wedding procedure, pp. 50 ff.)

C. *Recording the Marriage*: At the following monthly meeting for business, the Arrangements Committee should report that the wedding was held on the given date, and this is entered in the Meeting minutes. A copy of the Certificate of Marriage should be made for the Meeting’s Marriage Book. (Alternatively, a copy of the wording and a list of those who attended the marriage can be provided to the Meeting.) A copy of the wedding invitation and a photograph of the couple enhance the record in the Marriage Book. These items should be gathered and given to the Clerk by the time the Arrangements Committee reports to meeting for business. The wedding process is at an end, but the fellowship of the joint search in marriage has only just begun.

VI. Selected Further Reading

Friends and Weddings, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, Quaker Press, 1987.

Living with Oneself and Others, New England Yearly Meeting Ministry and Counsel, 2001.

Marriage: A Spiritual Leading for Lesbian, Gay and Straight Couples, Leslie Hill, Pendle Hill Pamphlet no. 308, 1993.

Marriage and Commitment, in Southeastern Yearly Meeting *Faith & Practice*, 2006.

Quaker Marriage, Edward Milligan, Quaker Press, 1994.

Toward a Quaker View of Sex, Britain Yearly Meeting, 1963.

A Wedding Packet, a compilation of resources, available from the Quaker Information Center, Philadelphia.

A Well-Arranged Wedding: Modern Complexity Challenges Quaker Simplicity, Nancy Taylor, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting *Pastoral Care Newsletter*, Vol. 16, no. 3, March 2009.

