

Asheville Friends Meeting Marriage Procedure Approved Third Month, 2008

Introduction

We at Asheville Friends Meeting are blessed by the loving relationships that form our community, including those which lead to marriage. This document clarifies our community process concerning marriages taken under the care of our Meeting: clearness, wedding assistance, witness, and ongoing support.

We understand marriage to be the voluntary, loving and just union, and living partnership of two adult people. We are tender in our awareness that individuals may come to marriage for different reasons. Yet, we also understand marriage under the care of the Meeting to be a union based on Quaker testimonies. Couples seeking marriage under the care of the Meeting are inviting the support of the Meeting in witnessing such a union. Asheville Friends Meeting offers marriage under the care of the Meeting to all couples. In accordance with our Minute "There is that of God in every person," approved June 4, 2006, our definition of "couple" is not limited by sexual orientation or gender presentation.

We are mindful that the work of our Meeting is to witness, nurture and support the work of the Spirit in the couple seeking marriage. As George Fox reminds us, marriage "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) Drawing from Quaker testimonies we remind ourselves that truth is continually revealed. Our important task is not to enforce the will of the Meeting, but to discover the will of God working through the couple.

Overview of the Marriage Process

A couple wishing to be married under the care of the Asheville Friends Meeting is asked to send a letter requesting this to the Meeting addressed to the clerk and signed by both individuals. They are advised to approach the Meeting in a spirit of openness and patience. Couples should be advised that the process for clearness and approval can take several months to complete. Couples are asked to keep this in mind when making their plans and to respectfully give the Meeting adequate time for considering their requests.

Our clerk will read this letter of request at the next Monthly Meeting for Business, and the Meeting will be asked to hold the couple in the Light, making a friendly outreach to them in this endeavor. The couple's letter, along with the names of anyone expressing a desire to serve on a clearness committee for marriage for them, will be forwarded to our Ministry and Counsel Committee; this standing Meeting committee will seek additional names from the couple and then officially appoint a clearness committee and report the names of those serving on it at the next Monthly Meeting for Business. Anyone with affirmations or concerns about the marriage request may forward them directly to the clearness committee.

The clearness committee will meet promptly with the couple in a worshipful spirit to explore the couple's leading for marriage. They will meet as many times as needed to establish clearness, using the guidance provided by the below queries for marriage and by leadings of the Spirit. In some cases the committee may discern a need to meet with others potentially affected by a marriage request, such as children of one of the couple or an ex-spouse involved with the Meeting. As needed, the committee may seek the support of Ministry and Counsel in their discernment process. Ministry and Counsel should be informed of the

clearness committee's progress, and when its work is complete the committee will report directly back to the Monthly Meeting for Business. The report should include a broad description of the process used to come to clearness about the marriage request, the status of the couple's intentions regarding marriage, and the committee's recommendation about whether or not the Meeting should take the couple's marriage under its care.

If it accepts the marriage under its care, the Meeting will appoint a wedding committee to assist in the marriage and legal arrangements. After the wedding ceremony is complete, this committee will make a report to the Meeting and then be laid down. At this time, the marriage is officially recorded into the Meeting records.

Our Meeting is presently not in unity about the degree of commitment to our Meeting or to the Religious Society of Friends that the Meeting should require of a couple before taking their marriage under the care of the Meeting. We are adopting the traditional stand that at least one of the couple should be a member of the Religious Society of Friends. If their membership is in another Meeting, then Ministry and Counsel shall consult with that Meeting's clerk regarding that Meeting's level of support for the marriage. In some cases the home Meeting may provide the clearness process and report directly to our Meeting.

We also recognize that some non-members manifest commitment to our Meeting and to the Society equal to that of a formal member. In such cases we may, following leadings of the Spirit in our Monthly Meeting for Business, still offer them support in the form of an appointed clearness committee and/or assistance with their marriage ceremony "after the manner of Friends." The basic element of this marriage ceremony is that the marriage vows are spoken by the couple out of the context of unprogrammed worship.

In cases where the Meeting decides not to take a marriage under its care, or where neither one of the couple has had a long commitment to the Meeting or to the Society, individuals in the Meeting may still be willing to assist with a marriage ceremony "after the manner of Friends". This requires no formal Meeting approval, but willingness to provide such assistance may depend on the degree of participation of the couple in the life of the Meeting. The Meeting will not provide assistance with legal registration for these marriages, but will endeavor to lovingly support the couple.

Queries for those Considering Marriage

The following queries can be used by couples to explore their leading for such a commitment, even before requesting marriage under the care of the Meeting. They are also for use by appointed clearness committees when meeting with couples who have requested marriage under the care of the Meeting. Given that the foundation for the clearness process is worship, these queries are offered merely as guides to the process. The committee and the couple are asked to remain open to leadings of the Spirit as they seek clearness together. Other queries which arise out of worship are welcome.

Relationship

What hopes and expectations do you have for your marriage? What concerns do you have about your future together? Have you shared these with each other?

What values do you hope to use as the foundation for your relationship?

What aspects of your relationship do you see as strengths to draw upon as you build your life together? What aspects do you see as possible challenges that may need your attention over time?

What do you have in common with each other? In what ways do you differ from each other? Have you explored these questions in the context of different aspects of building a life together?

How openly and clearly can you communicate with each other? What process will you go through in making decisions? How will you be able to handle anger and conflict?

What duties and responsibilities to each other will you undertake in the establishment of a home?

Do you enjoy each others friends? Do you have personal relationships and interests that do not include your spouse? What are your attitudes towards this?

How do you accommodate each other's individuality, including different interests, personalities and backgrounds?

Religion and Spirituality

What role do you want Quakerism and Quaker testimonies to play in your marriage relationship? What role does spirituality play in your lives individually and as a couple?

What would you like from the Meeting in regards to your relationship? Why are you asking to be married under the care of the Meeting?

Are you familiar with the traditions of unprogrammed Friends wedding ceremonies? Do you anticipate planning a ceremony that may differ from these practices or may include elements from another faith tradition?

Finances and Career

Have you discussed your plans for employment, education, career development, investments, and retirement? Are you clear with each other about how you will manage the finances of the home? What are your attitudes about saving and spending money? How will you distinguish between luxuries and necessities? How do you intend to share your income, debts, and assets?

Legal Considerations

Have you considered the legal aspects of marriage? Are you aware of what legal options are available to you? What are the potential benefits and the potential downsides of taking steps to legalize your marriage and/or to provide legal protections for your marriage? Do you want to file your marriage with the State of North Carolina, should this step be available to you?

Are you aware of any impediments to your marriage? Are there any legal, financial, or medical situations that could create challenges for you or even make it impossible to enter freely into marriage?

Have you considered what, if any, changes you will make in the beneficiaries of life insurance policies, asset inheritance and child guardianship in wills, medical power of attorney, medical insurance coverage,

or title to any real estate or other property?

Sexuality

What are your feelings about privacy, freedom and trust?

What is your conception of the role that sex plays in a marriage? How do you feel about sexual and emotional fidelity in marriage?

Are you willing to give the time, patience, and openness necessary to a good sexual relationship? Do you feel free to discuss your sexual needs and concerns?

Children

Have you clarified your feelings about having or raising children? What are your attitudes about family planning and the possibility of unexpected pregnancy? Do you have similar attitudes about raising children? Would you be happy without children? How do you feel about adoption?

If you do raise children, how do you envision providing a religious upbringing for them? What kinds of religious and ethical issues do you disagree on? How do you deal with such disagreements?

If either of you already has children, how will you endeavor to build a cohesive, loving family which includes them?

Extended Family and Community

If your marriage is in any way unconventional, how do you intend to meet any obstacles that may arise? Have you considered what support systems or efforts you may need to nurture and protect your relationship and the life you plan to build together?

What support and/or challenges can you expect from your families of origin? What about your existing friends and/or community?

The Role of the Wedding Committee

The members of the Wedding Committee will assist the couple in making arrangements for the Meeting for Worship for the Purpose of Marriage (see the attached check list). The Wedding Committee may play as active a role as the couple desires in the planning and execution of the ceremony. At a minimum, the Wedding Committee should review with the couple their plans and offer guidance regarding traditional aspects of a ceremony held in the manner of Friends. Such guidance may focus on the format for the meeting for worship; the inclusion of a wedding certificate; the tradition of not recording or photographing the meeting for worship; and the ways in which Quaker testimonies can help shape the ceremony planning.

The Wedding Committee may want to review with the couple what legal arrangements, if any, they plan to make for their marriage and offer support and assistance in this process. Honoring that of God in each of us, the Meeting will leave it up to the couple to request assistance from the Meeting to legally register their marriage with the State of North Carolina. The Meeting recognizes the value of legal registration for

many couples, while accepting that this step may not be in the best interest of some couples and may even meet resistance from the State of NC for some others; nonetheless, the committee, on behalf of the Meeting, will assist the couple in carrying out their desires in this matter, even supporting individual active witness in trying to register a marriage not currently allowed by the State. While we acknowledge the long held testimony of Friends that the power to marry “is the work of the Lord only”, Asheville Friends Meeting also recognizes the power of the State of NC to determine which couples shall be able to benefit from legal registration of their marriage. Moreover, we feel that legal registration for any marriage is an important protection for families with children. We ask the Wedding Committee to assist couples who don't choose or are not eligible for legal registration with other legal steps they can take to protect their family.

The Role of the Meeting

The Meeting will endeavor to provide ongoing support for both partners and for their marriage relationship as needed, but especially in times of challenges or major life changes. We encourage the couple to avail themselves of the resources that are available to them in our Meeting – reconvening their clearness committee for marriage, seeking listening and counsel by members of the Ministry and Counsel committee or others in the meeting in whom the couple places trust, requesting practical assistance from the Pastoral Care Committee, requesting a new clearness committee be appointed by the Ministry and Counsel committee, and participating in Friends' activities or workshops that encourage good communication and trust building, such as Couple Enrichment.

Resources on Marriage

Several books, pamphlets and programs offer guidance for couples intending marriage in Quaker Meetings, for the Clearness Committees and for ongoing work of maintaining a marriage. The following (among others) are recommended:

- Elizabeth Watson, *Clearness for Marriage*. Family Relations Committee, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1980, 17 pp.
- “*In the presence of God and these our Friends...*” *A Quaker Marriage*. Family Relations Committee, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1988, 26 pp.
- *Friends and Weddings*, FCG Quaker Books.
- *A Resource Guide to be used by a Same Sex Couple and by Their Monthly Meeting's Committee on Clearness in the Event of Their Request for A Celebration of Commitment or Marriage*. Family Relations Committee, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1988, 13 pp.
- Quaker Marriage by Edward Milligan. Available from FGC Quakerbooks.
- Marriage From the Heart: Eight Commitments of a Spiritually Fulfilling Life Together by Lois Kellerman and Nelly Bly. Available from FGC Quakerbooks.
- *Marriage and Commitment* by Southeastern Yearly Meeting. Available from FGC Quakerbooks.
- Couples Enrichment for Friends Program sponsored by the Traveling Ministries Committee of Friends General Conference. You can find more information on the FGC website at <http://www.fgcquaker.org/traveling/couples/index.html>.

Check List for Arrangements for Meeting for Worship for Marriage

- Clarify which arrangements will be made by members of the Wedding Committee and the Meeting and which by the couple and their friends and/or family.
- If the couple desires to register their marriage with the State of North Carolina, secure a marriage

license. The Meeting (either members of the Wedding Committee or the Clerk) will be responsible for signing it for submission to the State following the ceremony.

- Secure a date and location for the ceremony and any reception to follow. As desired arrange for a caterer and musicians.
- Arrange for a Wedding Certificate to be prepared. Will the couple use traditional Quaker vows or prepare their own?
- Create invitations and consider including information about a Quaker Wedding ceremony. The pamphlet *"In the presence of God and these our Friends..."*, noted in the resources section, may be helpful.
- Create a Wedding Program for the ceremony as needed, perhaps including information about a Quaker Wedding ceremony.
- Decide the details of the ceremony:
 - Should someone stand at the beginning to explain what to expect from this Wedding ceremony, especially the traditional Quaker aspects?
 - Will rings be exchanged, and will someone be needed as a ring custodian until the appropriate moment?
 - Shall the couple sign the Wedding Certificate following the sharing of vows, the exchanging of rings, or later? When shall the members of the Wedding Committee, family members and friends be invited to sign the certificate?
 - Does the couple desire music or any reading preceding, during or at the close of the ceremony? Who will do this?
 - Who will close the Meeting for Worship, and how?
- Who will be responsible for helping guests sign the Wedding Certificate and keeping it safe?
- How will the room be set up for the wedding ceremony? Where will the couple sit, and where will the family and close friends, the Wedding Committee, and the other guests sit? Where will the certificate be?
- What assistance is needed from the Wedding Committee, Meeting members, or family and friends for set up, transition to a reception, food and service at the reception, any other reception activities, and clean-up?