Marriage and Committed Relationships

Marriages and committed relationships pass through many phases, and through all phases the quality of the relationship is tested. The development of a relationship is a growing experience. Respect for each other and enduring, loving expression deepen the bond. With God’s help, each couple finds a true path and a way of living that leads to a strong union. Yet, whatever the style of life, all relationships need a foundation of commitment, communication, honesty, and integrity. Patience, humor and a spirit of adventure, guided by a mutual trust in God’s presence, strengthen the present and brighten the hope for the future.

Marriage and Committed Relationships

NOTE TO FRIENDS: This document presents the material currently on pages 91-98 of the 1993 NPYM Faith and Practice. The sections have been re-ordered for a more logical flow. Some changes have been made and some material has been provisionally added according to suggestions Friends have made during several years of discussion. Specific material to be included about those topics is being sought and sifted.

Comments about specific additions, deletions, or changes appear in [italics in double square brackets]. Such comments will not appear in the final printed version of Faith and Practice.

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Marriage and Committed Relationships

Adapted from Pacific Yearly Meeting, Faith and Practice

[[Isaac Penington 1667 quotation moved to “Mutual Care” section in Faith part of F&P; PYM quotation moved up from p. 94]]

The spiritual journey of an individual can be enhanced and strengthened in a loving, committed relationship. Friends have long recognized that some couples are called into a covenant relationship, a ministry of caring, which with Divine assistance may open the door to deep and unreserved love, to forgiveness, to sharing strengths, to trust and to the nurture of each other’s growth.

Early Friends recognized that the joining of two people in such a covenant relationship “is the work of the Lord only, and not the priests or magistrates: for it is God’s ordinance and not man’s; and therefore Friends cannot consent that they should join them together: for we marry none; it is the Lord’s work, and we are but witnesses.” (George Fox, 1669)

When a couple feels called into such a covenant relationship, they seek clearness with their Meeting. When the Meeting finds clearness in the couple, and clearness within the Meeting to take their relationship under the care of the Meeting, a Meeting for Worship is specially called in which the couple publicly affirm and celebrate their commitment to one another.

[[1993 F&P said “their lifetime commitment”]]

Monthly Meetings within the Yearly Meeting have a variety of responses to accepting the role of clearness and care of committed relationships, whether heterosexual or same-gender. Meetings choose to leave the naming of the committed relationship and the celebration to the couple.

[[1993 F&P included the clause “A few [meetings] are able only to find clearness to oversee heterosexual relationships” –do the changes to this paragraph accurately current practice in NPYM?]]

Coming Under the Care of the Meeting

Before taking a couple’s commitment under its care a Meeting, through a Clearness Committee, counsels with the partners, seeking to establish their clearness in what they are undertaking. If the committee so recommends, and the Meeting agrees, the relationship and couple are taken under the care of the Meeting. This includes a Meeting for Worship at which the couple states their intentions, the Meeting witnessing this and a celebration to mark the occasion. The care of the Meeting means that the
Couple is surrounded by a loving community which may take action as necessary to support the well being of the two individuals, of the relationship itself, and of any children involved. The Meeting provides this care in the form of support and guidance, including the clearness process, to every couple in the Meeting.

[3rd sentence in paragraph above “This includes…” added, also last sentence “The Meeting provides…” to show responsibility of care for all committed couples within the Meeting. Paragraph from 1993 F&P beginning “A couple, regardless of sexual orientation, comes under the care…” is omitted.]

**Clearness Process**

**Request**

When two people wish to have their covenant relationship taken under the care of the Monthly Meeting, they write a letter to the Meeting, in care of the Clerk, stating their intention and requesting the Meeting to begin the clearness process. In the good order of Friends it is expected that a minimum of three months will be needed between the sending of the request and the desired date of the celebration. It is expected that at least one of the partners is a member or regular attender of the Meeting.

[Sentence “If one of the partners…” from current p. 92 moved to Clearness Committee queries below]

[Question for Friends: What is your experience with requests from non-members? Would it be useful to describe a process for allowing a couple to use the space for a “wedding after the manner of Friends” that is not under the care of the Meeting?]

**Clearness Committee**

When the couple requests that their commitment be taken under the care of the Meeting, the Committee on Oversight or the Meeting appoints a Clearness Committee. It is important that members asked to serve be free of time constraints, be open to prayerful consideration regarding the right course of action, and be individuals well-founded in Friends’ practice.

The couple and the Clearness Committee meet together and separately for thoughtful and prayerful discussions to seek God’s will regarding the proposed celebration. The committee or the couple may present specific queries or topics to give direction to the discussions, or discussion may arise out of worship. It is important that those participating in the clearness process approach each meeting with open hearts and minds, that sufficient time be allotted for thorough understanding and seasoning to occur, and that any encumbrance be explored to ensure that both parties are free of conflicting obligations.

Most of these subjects will arise naturally in the course of the interviews, and it is preferable if the prospective partners feel free to broach them themselves. It is well for the committee to have topics in mind and to see that they are covered.

1. **Background and Acquaintance.** How well do the couple know each other? What are their basic common values? How do they adapt to differences in background, religion, temperament, and interests? Can they meet their differences with humor, mutual respect, patience, and generosity? Do they have the courage and the willingness to go together for outside guidance with any problem they are unable to solve?

2. **Religious Beliefs, Feelings, Aspirations.** Do they see commitment or marriage as a spiritual relationship to be entered into with appreciation of its Divine basis? How do they propose to meet their religious needs as a couple? How do they plan to make their relationship accessible to Divine assistance? Do they endeavor to hold each other in the Light?

3. **Growth and Fulfillment.** Do they think of themselves as trusted and equal partners, sharing responsibilities and decisions? Are they supportive of each other’s goals for personal growth and fulfillment? Do they communicate their feelings and needs, their dreams and fears to each other? Are they able to discuss their sexual expectations in a way which leads to satisfaction for each person?
4. **Daily Living.** Have they discussed and worked through questions regarding the use and management of money? Have they considered how to resolve minor daily issues such as who takes out the trash or does the dishes? Have they given consideration to, and found ways to resolve real anger when it arises within the relationship? Have they found ways to resolve life style issues, such as one being a morning person and one being an evening person, so that neither feels personally rejected? Have they explored attitudes towards holidays and gift giving? Have they discussed the names each will use?

5. **Remarriage.** A new marriage or committed relationship takes much faith, strength, and courage following the loss of a partner. Remarriage will raise questions for the couple such as: Has a suitable period of time elapsed to establish the new relationship? Are the circumstances of the new relationship likely to make it successful and fruitful in spiritual happiness? Has the couple given consideration to assuring the welfare and legal rights of all the children involved? Can the children be involved in the clearness process? If the new relationship involves creation of a blended family, has the couple given thorough and prayerful consideration to the new family structure?

[[This new #5 based on “Remarriage” from pp. 94-95 in 1993 F&P now moved into Clearness Process queries. Paragraph from p. 95 “A common religious faith…” omitted.]]

[[Question for Friends: The 1993 F&P suggests including an ex-partner and his or her new family in the clearness process. What is your group’s experience with this approach?]]

[[Are there other clearness queries appropriate to remarriages?]]

6. **Relationships with Others.** Are they aware of the need for developing a variety of other friendships that contribute both to individual growth and to their relationship? Have they considered together whether or not they desire children: the problems as well as the joys children would bring, and the responsibilities for nurturing, guiding, and disciplining them? How do they view their relationships with each other’s families and their obligations toward society?

7. **Relationship with the Monthly Meeting.** What does the couple expect the Monthly Meeting to do to support their relationship? What do they expect their relationship to bring to the Monthly Meeting?

8. **Discharge of Prior Commitments.** Do they have obligations, personal or financial, which need to be met or discharged? If one of the partners holds membership in another Monthly Meeting, the Clearness Committee should consult with that Meeting.

9. **Attitude of Families.** What are the views of their families toward the prospective marriage or commitment? These could be ascertained directly by the committee through personal conferences or correspondence.

10. **Timing.** Is this an appropriate time in each partner’s life to undertake the new responsibilities and other changes that would result from a formal commitment to one another?

[[#10 is anew topic per a suggestion from Friends]]

11. **The Celebration.** How do they view the Meeting for Worship on the occasion of marriage or celebration which is to take place under the care of the Meeting? Are they familiar with the procedure? Do they appreciate the values involved in the Quaker form of commitment?

When the couple and the committee are clear to recommend that the Meeting take the couple under its care, the Clearness Committee reports its endorsement either to the Oversight Committee or directly to the Monthly Meeting indicating that unity has been found. The Monthly Meeting accepts the report for consideration and seasoning and, when it is able to unite in approving the request, appoints an Arrangements Committee, guided by the couple’s wishes. The Arrangements Committee and the couple set a time and a place for the Meeting for Worship.

[[1st and last sentence in paragraph above amended to reflect current practice.]]

It may be that unity to move forward is not readily found. The committee and the couple may choose
to continue seeking God’s will in this matter, or they may choose to lay aside the request indefinitely or permanently. When the right course of action is clear, the Clearness Committee or the Oversight Committee reports this to the Monthly Meeting.

[[Paragraph on p. 93 “Thoroughness in the clearness and guidance…” omitted as redundant.]]

Arrangements Committee

This committee, appointed by the Monthly Meeting, works with the couple to insure that the couple’s desires are met regarding the Meeting for Worship in celebration of the couple’s commitment to one another: that it is accomplished with simplicity, dignity, and reverence. The reception, if any, is also part of the committee’s responsibility.

[[“ceremony” replaced by “Meeting for Worship in celebration…”]]

Couples who meet their state’s legal marriage requirements may wish to have their marriage legally recognized. If they do, it is their responsibility to acquire the marriage license; it is the responsibility of the Arrangements Committee to arrange for the signature (usually by the Clerk of the Meeting) of the state’s certificate of marriage and to file it with the county clerk or designated officer. The state certificate of marriage form may need to be changed to reflect the actual practice of Friends. The state recognizes the couple as legally married only when the certificate of marriage is properly signed and filed.

Meeting to Celebrate Commitment

The Meeting for Worship for the celebration gathers in silence at the appointed time. The meaning of the Meeting for Worship and the procedure which will follow may be explained in the invitations or early in the meeting. During worship the couple will rise and, taking each other by the hand, declare in words to this effect, each speaking in turn:

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

Or

In the presence of God, and before these our Friends, I commit myself to you, ____________, promising, with Divine assistance, to be a loving and faithful (husband/wife/partner).

[[Question for Friends: what is your practice about couples writing their own alternative vows?]]

Worship continues, often with rich vocal ministry, and is closed by the committee, or other Friends approved by them.

Traditionally, most couples sign a certificate attesting to their commitment and present it for signing by Friends and others attending the Meeting. The certificate is usually headed with wording of the couple’s choosing, includes the names of the couple, the date of the Meeting for Worship, and the fact that the relationship is under the care of the named Monthly Meeting. Those attending the Meeting for Worship sign the certificate at the rise of Meeting.

[[Paragraph above added to reflect current practice. Paragraph from 1993 p. 96 omitted: “After these declarations…” omitted as now redundant]]

The couple may use variations of these procedures with the approval of their Arrangements Committee.

[[Paragraph under Marriage or Commitments Outside the Care of the Meeting p. 96 moved into Meeting’s Care for the Relationship below. Quotation adapted from Lucretia Mott (p. 96) omitted as too heavily adapted]]
Meeting’s Care for the Relationship

Friends are reminded that the Meeting’s care of a relationship does not end with the celebration but endures.

Meetings have an important role in nurturing, supporting, and celebrating the couples under their care. In a loving community of persons of similar religious values and priorities, couples can be sustained and guided in their efforts to build an enduring relationship. Meetings may nurture committed relationships in many ways: workshops and supportive discussion groups, celebration of anniversaries, annual Meetings for Worship for the renewal of vows, and committees for clearness.

Friends are frequently very private and reluctant to bring forth personal problems. Nevertheless, individuals and couples are encouraged to bring forth difficulties and to allow the Meeting to provide guidance, wisdom, and referral to appropriate professionals when needed. Most important, the Meeting and individual Friends assist couples through prayer and a strong belief in Divine intercession in daily life.

Each couple must be aware that their committed relationship has far-reaching effects on others. We must be willing to seek Divine help and Meeting oversight for assistance in fulfilling the covenant vows. In taking the couple under their care, the Meeting assumes the responsibility to be steadfast and direct, as well as sensitive, in fulfilling its obligation of care.

Some queries that may help a Meeting determine ways of nurturing covenant relationships:

- How does our Meeting nurture couples? Do the practices we currently follow meet the needs of the couples in our Monthly Meeting?
- Does our Meeting provide resources that may be helpful to couples on various topics, such as couples’ enrichment classes and parenting classes?
- What informal practices to support couples are encouraged among members and attenders?

Care for commitments made outside the Meeting. If a member is married or celebrates a commitment outside the care of the Meeting, the Oversight Committee should arrange that someone visit with the new couple, expressing the Meeting’s care and assure them that the non-member partner will be made welcome.

When a couple has been married under the care of another Meeting, the partners may ask the Oversight Committee to have their relationship taken under the care of the current Meeting. If so a Clearness Committee can be appointed and the same process of recommendation to the Meeting may be followed with amended queries and ending with the Meeting’s acceptance of the care of the relationship.

Renewal of Vows

A couple joined together outside of the Meeting or a couple that has been married for many years may desire to renew their vows in the presence of the Divine and the loving community of their Meeting. The couple can request a Clearness Committee, to explore the health of their relationship and to chart their future. The celebration is a wonderful opportunity for the Meeting to express its loving support of the couple in the specially-called Meeting for Worship.
We thank God then, for the pleasures, joys and triumphs of [life together]; 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 at 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.

Faith and Practice, London Yearly Meeting, 1960

Separation and Divorce

Committed relationships can experience both fulfillment and tension. Whether or not their relationship is formally under the Meeting’s care, if a couple is encountering difficulties and their relationship is under strain, they should be encouraged to seek assistance through the Oversight Committee. Understanding that emotions during such intimate conflict may be powerful and destructive, both to the individuals and to the Meeting, it is recommended that, if possible, the couple enter into a clearness process to discern God's guidance. In that sacred place all should attempt compassionate communication so that decisions and arrangements can be made in a spirit of forgiveness.

When children are involved, the Meeting should remember their enduring need for love and security, both at home and in the Meeting community, and take care to protect them so that they are not turned against either parent.

When there is an abusive relationship, immediate separation may be necessary to protect all those involved from further harm.

No marriage or committed relationship should be terminated lightly or quickly. If, after thoughtful and prayerful consideration and a period of seasoning, the couple finds that serious contemplation of separation or divorce is advisable, they are encouraged to seek further clearness through the Oversight Committee of their Meeting. It is generally preferable to have one support committee or clearness committee for the couple. Occasionally it may be best to have a separate committee for each partner. In such cases it is essential that the two committees work together closely and meet jointly at intervals to maintain communication. The clearness committee members are not marriage counselors or problem-solvers; instead they offer to walk on a painful journey with the family, reminding them to seek God's assistance with every step. A dissolution moves forward when it is clear that the marriage or committed relationship no longer exists.

When both individuals in the separating or divorcing couple are active in the same Meeting, one or both may feel alienated from further participation there. If the Meeting has taken an active role in the clearness process, the sense of alienation may be lessened, and separation may proceed with tenderness and charity. With Meeting support, the individuals are encouraged to find ways to continue participating in the life of the Meeting. All in the Meeting are lovingly advised to answer that of God in both individuals and to avoid “taking sides.” The Meeting community may have its own sense of failure and loss to work through. It may also be helpful for the Meeting and the couple to have a called Meeting for Worship on the occasion of the dissolution, to seek God’s grace for all and to acknowledge the termination within the loving community of the Meeting.
We would counsel Friends to take timely advice in periods of difficulty. The early sharing of problems with sympathetic Friends or marriage counsellors can often bring release from misunderstandings and give positive help towards new joy together. Friends ought to be able to do this, but much will depend on the quality of our life together in the Society. If marriages among us fail, we are all part of that failure. We need to be more sensitive to each other’s needs, knowing one another in the things which are material as in the things which are eternal.

*Marriage & Parenthood Committee, 1956
Faith & Practice, London Yearly Meeting, 1972*

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**Some questions for discussion around Marriage and Committed Relationships in NPYM’s Faith & Practice**

From NPYM Friends and the Committee on the Discipline

- Do the suggested changes to the 1993 *Faith and Practice* text fully reflect the current practice in your local Quaker group? Specifically:
  - The assumption that all NPYM Meetings are open to taking a same-gender commitment under their care
  - Removing most references to “lifelong” relationships
  - References to “ceremony” replaced by “Meeting for Worship in celebration…”

- What is your group’s experience with
  - Requests for Quaker weddings from couples who are not part of the Meeting community
  - Renewal of vows
  - Separation and divorce — particularly
    - How has your group worked to maintain loving relationships with both members of the [former] couple?
    - What is your experience with calling a Meeting for Worship to acknowledge dissolution of a marriage?
  - Transferring care of a relationship from one meeting to another

- Material has been added in several places, particularly under “Meeting’s Care for the Relationship,” to provide more guidance on how a Quaker community can relate to the couples within it. Is this new material helpful? Is it enough? If not, what should be added?

- Material has been added in the “Separation and Divorce” section to speak to concerns raised by NPYM Friends. Is the new material enough to help Friends deal with the difficulties of divorce within a Meeting? If not, what should be added?
- What’s missing from this material that you find central to right understanding and ordering of a Quaker marriage or covenant relationship?
- Are there parts of this section that you think would belong better in some other part of the *Faith & Practice*? Parts that you think could be deleted?
- Please suggest any quotations that have been particularly inspiring for you.
- Please suggest any resources that have been particularly helpful to you.