

Marriage at Gwynedd Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

“Marriage is a sacred commitment of two people to love one another in faithful partnership with the expectation that the relationship will mature and will be mutually enriching. Friends know that marriage depends on the inner experiences of the couple who marry and not on any external service or words. Thus, the ceremony in which the couple enter into this commitment is performed by the couple alone, in the presence of God, the families, and the worshipping community. Both the solemnity and the joy of the occasion are enhanced by its simplicity.”

--*Faith and Practice*, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1997

MARRIAGE AND FRIENDS

Contemplating Marriage at Gwynedd Friends Meeting

Friends consider marriage a binding relationship between two people, entered into in the presence of God and of witnessing friends and family. At Gwynedd Friends Meeting, we differentiate between requests for marriage “under the care of the meeting,” discussed in this pamphlet, and requests for the use of the meeting house as a setting for a wedding that is not under the care of a Friends Meeting¹. When members of Gwynedd Friends Meeting, or another monthly meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, desire to be married *under the care of* Gwynedd Meeting, they are asking the meeting community to enter into a process of discernment and care for them and their relationship that begins well in advance of the wedding itself and continues beyond the simple ceremony and celebration, even through the life of the marriage.

Being married under the care of the meeting implies an understanding of and acceptance of Quakerism and a close and ongoing relationship with the meeting community. For this reason, it is expected that at least one of the couple be a member of Gwynedd Meeting or another Friends Meeting. If the couple has attended Gwynedd Friends Meeting for a long time or has other strong ties to the meeting community, but neither is a member of the Religious Society of Friends, their request would be referred for loving and tender consideration and discernment by the Care and Counsel Committee.

¹ Requests for the use of the meeting house for weddings not under the care of the meeting should contact the Gwynedd Meeting Office Manager about space availability, building use guidelines, cost-sharing information and reservation arrangements. The Office Manager can be reached by phone: at (215) 699-3055 or by e-mail at gwyneddfriends@verizon.net.

Marriage Under the Care of the Meeting: The Clearness Process

“The call to commitment is not limited to two individuals. It involves the meeting as well, since the couple’s spiritual leading occurs in the context of a faith community, and is tested in that community as any other leading would be. The question for the couple is, “Are we called to a covenant relationship with each other?” The question for the meeting is, “Are we clear to take this *marriage*—this whole relationship—under our care?”... Thus the clarity reached when a meeting takes a marriage under its care is a *double* clarity—of the couple and of the meeting.”

--Jan Hoffman, “Clearness Committees for Marriage or Commitment,” Reprinted in *Grounded in God: Care and Nurture in Friends Meetings*, Patricia McBee, ed.

When a couple requests to be married under the care of Gwynedd Meeting, they are entering into a period of discernment and preparation, individually, as a couple, and with the meeting community. The first step is for the couple to send a written request for marriage under the care of Gwynedd Friends Meeting to the clerk of the meeting, who refers their request to the Care and Counsel Committee. At Gwynedd Friends Meeting, there is a standing Committee for Clearness for Marriage named by the Care and Counsel Committee and approved by the meeting, made up of experienced members of the meeting who feel called to work with couples contemplating marriage. Usually half of the members of the Committee for Clearness for Marriage will meet separately with each member of the couple the first time. Subsequent meetings are generally held with the entire Committee for Clearness and both members of the couple present. The process may extend over a period of several weeks, and the meetings are often deeply centered times of support and care, exploration and discernment. Thoroughness in the clearness and guidance process is essential in seasoning the relationship and in establishing a strong basis on which to begin this lifetime journey.

The process for clearness for marriage is a process of double discernment. The couple explores their understanding of and readiness for the commitment they are preparing to make. The Committee for Clearness, and the meeting community, seek clarity that this couple has a true leading to marry at this time and that the meeting is prepared to take this new relationship, not just the wedding or the ceremony, under its care.

After the final meeting together, if the couple and the Committee for Clearness are in unity that the wedding should go forward, the committee makes a written recommendation for marriage to the Care and Counsel Committee for further seasoning and approval. If the recommendation is approved, the clerk of the Care and Counsel Committee notifies the couple and reads the recommendation at the next Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business. If, however, at any time during this process, unity to move forward has not been reached by the couple, the Committee for Clearness, or the Care and Counsel Committee, the recommendation may be to continue to seek God’s will in this matter or to lay aside the request indefinitely or permanently. When the right course of action is clear, the Care and Counsel Committee brings the recommendation to the monthly meeting.

At the next Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business, the Care and Counsel’s report is read, and approval of the meeting is sought. If the recommendation is for the marriage to take place under the care of the meeting, the clerk of the meeting asks for the meeting’s approval. Once the meeting has approved, the couple is free to proceed with planning the wedding. If the couple has already decided who they would like to serve on their Marriage Oversight

Committee, and if these individuals have been contacted and have agreed, their names may be read and approved by the meeting at this time.

For planning purposes, **a couple should expect the clearness process to take several months** depending on the timing of the request, scheduling availability of the various parties and the scheduled monthly meetings of the Care and Counsel Committee and the Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business.

Planning the Wedding: The Marriage Oversight Committee

Whereas the Committee for Clearness for Marriage is named by the Care and Counsel Committee, it is up to the couple, with guidance from the Committee for Clearness, to name who they want to serve on their Marriage Oversight Committee. Since this is the committee who will assist the couple in planning the wedding, it is important that those the couple choose to serve on their Marriage Oversight Committee be familiar with the appropriate practices, procedures and practicalities involved. The Marriage Oversight Committee has the responsibility to advise on and/or help with the marriage vows, the marriage certificate which is signed by the couple and all present at the wedding, the marriage license, reservation of the meeting house facilities, parking, child care, wedding rehearsal, clean up, etc.

Quaker Marriage and Legal Considerations in Pennsylvania

In the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, when at least one member of the couple applying for a marriage license is a member of the Religious Society of Friends **and is being married under the care of the meeting**, the couple requests a **self-uniting marriage license**, issued by the County Clerk. A self-uniting marriage license is signed by two witnesses (usually members of the couple's Marriage Oversight Committee) in place of the officiant's signature otherwise required by law.²

The Wedding

The marriage takes place within a meeting for worship. In addition to the couple's friends and family, the wedding is traditionally open to the Gwynedd Meeting community. The couple enters the meeting and is seated at the front of the room. The couple will have arranged for a member of their Marriage Oversight Committee to stand and greet family and friends and briefly explain what to expect to those unfamiliar with Friends' practices. At this time, it will also be explained that taking photos and audio or video taping are not appropriate because they can be experienced as intrusions into the spirit of worship.

² If the Care and Counsel Committee at Gwynedd Friends Meeting has discerned that it is appropriate to take a couple under the care of the meeting when neither is a member of the Religious Society of Friends, the couple needs to address the County Clerk to determine if they are eligible for a self-uniting license. Some, but not all, counties in Pennsylvania have been granting self-uniting marriage licenses to non-Quakers in the past few years, under certain circumstances. Other options, such as having an officiant at the wedding, would have to be discussed with the meeting as part of the clearness and oversight process.

During the period of worship, in an atmosphere of quiet and reverence, the couple rises. Taking each other by the hand, they make their promises, using the following or similar words:

In the presence of God and these our friends and family, I take thee (name) to be my wife/husband/partner, promising with divine assistance to be unto thee a loving and faithful wife/husband/partner so long as we both shall live.

Although it is not required, the couple may then exchange rings. No third person officiates because Friends believe that God alone can create such a union and give it significance. After the vows are said, and the couple is again seated, the Quaker Marriage Certificate that has been prepared is brought to them to sign. When it has been signed by both members of the couple, the certificate is read aloud by someone the couple has designated ahead of time. The reading is done with dignity and care so as to contribute to the atmosphere of worship. The meeting for worship then continues with silent prayer, meditation, and spoken messages.

The individual the couple has chosen to close the meeting may make an opportunity for the wedding party to withdraw. Immediately following the wedding, everyone present is asked to sign the Quaker Marriage Certificate as a witness to the marriage.

Guidelines for the Quaker Marriage Certificate and a sample text can be found in *Faith and Practice*.

Both sections of the special “Quaker” or “self-uniting” marriage license obtained from the county are signed by the couple and by two members of the Marriage Oversight Committee as witnesses. The proper section of the signed license is returned within the legal time limit to the county office from which it has been obtained.

At the next Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business, the Marriage Oversight Committee reports to the monthly meeting that the wedding has taken place in accordance with Friends’ practices, and, if appropriate, that the requirements of the law have been properly observed.

The care and nurture of a couple married under the care of the meeting continue as long as the couple is in the meeting community. Usually members of the couple’s Marriage Oversight Committee agree to follow up with the couple, often on an annual basis, to offer ongoing support and care.

SUGGESTED QUERIES

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 stronger 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.

--Adapted from North Pacific Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice*, 1993 and Reprinted in Southeastern Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice*, 2005.

Queries for the Couple

In preparing for marriage under the care of Gwynedd Friends Meeting, it is hoped that couples will have open and honest discussions with each other about their expectations and understandings prior to sending their request for marriage under the care of the meeting and throughout the clearness process. There are many areas that should be considered. Some questions that should be explored include:

- Have we considered what it means to join our lives together?
- What are the duties and responsibilities that we are ready to assume in marriage?
- Where will we reside?
- What is important to each of us?
- How will we make decisions?
- How will we seek to resolve differences?
- What are our expectations about children?
- How will we continue to grow spiritually, as individuals and as a couple?
- How will we manage financially? How will we choose to use our money? Will we pool our money together or maintain separate accounts? Will we be able to budget together with harmony, understanding and mutual support?
- How will we spend our leisure time?
- How do we feel about interests that are not shared and how can we respect these differences?
- How will we integrate our lives with each other's parents, relatives and friends? If there are children from a prior relationship, even if they are now adult, how will they be integrated into our new relationship?
- How do we feel about each other's economic, religious and cultural backgrounds?
- Have we read and discussed together the portions of *Faith and Practice* that apply to weddings? How do we value the loving concern of the meeting in our marriage? Do we understand what it means to be married under the care of the meeting and welcome this ongoing relationship of care and support?
- Do we understand the clearness process for marriage? Do we understand the Quaker wedding itself, and are we ready to promise in the presence of God, family and friends, during a meeting for worship, to join together in marriage?

Queries for the Committee for Clearness for Marriage

Prior to meeting with each member of the couple individually and then with both members of the couple together, the members of the Committee for Clearness should prayerfully consider both general and specific topics they wish to discuss with the couple. They may wish to prepare a list of questions in advance, although they should always remember to stay open to other queries and areas to explore that arise during their meetings with the couple. Each couple is different and the queries and discussions with the Committee for Clearness for Marriage should reflect the unique character and circumstances of every couple. The committee may decide to share a list of queries with the couple prior to their first meeting.

Faith and Practice of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting suggests the following queries:

- How did the couple meet? What values and beliefs do they hold in common? On what matters do they differ? Can they meet differences with humor and respect? Are they open to considering outside help if such guidance seems warranted?
- Do they both see marriage as sacred? Are they open to seeking divine assistance? What are their plans for nurturing the spiritual basis for their marriage?
- Do they each see themselves and their partner as equal and trusted, sharing responsibilities and decisions? Do they communicate feelings, needs, dreams, and fears?
- Are they aware of the need for other friendships that contribute to both individual growth and the marriage relationship?
- Have they thought about children, and the joys and the challenges families create, including consideration of how the work is shared?
- If there are children in either relationship to consider, has the couple broached the subject of this change of relationship with them?
- How do they view their relationships to their extended families? To their community? To society as a whole?
- Are there prior obligations—legal or financial or other—that need to be met?
- What are the views of the parents concerning this relationship? Other family members?

Other queries that have been suggested by Friends include:

- Do both take time to affirm the other, to show appreciation for all the qualities and gifts that he or she brings to the relationship?
- Are both willing to recognize, accept and nurture growth and change in each other and as a couple?
- Are both individuals able to express their feelings, including anger and hostility or frustration, honestly but tenderly so that a creative resolution of such feelings may be sought?
- Have they discussed and worked through questions regarding the earning, use and management of money? Have they decided what financial resources will be held jointly and separately?
- What areas may the couple have avoided discussing and how can they be supported in doing so?

- What does the couple expect Gwynedd Friends Meeting do to support their relationship? What do they expect their relationship may bring to the meeting?
- Are they fully aware of each other's commitments, obligations and expectations in the use of all of their resources, including money, time, attention, and energy? Have they discussed how they will balance the demands of career, family, interests and service?
- How do they each view the wedding itself which will take place within a Meeting for Worship? Are they familiar with the procedure? Do they appreciate the values involved in the Quaker form of commitment? Do they understand that all arrangements, including invitations, need to wait until after the meeting has agreed to the marriage commitment under the care of the Meeting?

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The Committee for Clearness for Marriage

The role of the Committee for Clearness for Marriage at Gwynedd Meeting is to familiarize the couple with the philosophy of Friends' marriage in general and the process of marriage at Gwynedd Friends Meeting in particular, and to work with the couple to determine that they are ready for marriage at this time and that Gwynedd Meeting is clear to take their marriage under its care.

Gwynedd Friends Meeting has a standing Committee for Clearness for Marriage appointed by Care and Counsel Committee and approved by the monthly meeting.

Responsibilities

The Committee for Clearness for Marriage at Gwynedd Friends Meeting should be familiar with the information in this document and also with:

- The sections of *Faith and Practice* of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends having to do with Quaker marriage procedure and Quaker weddings
- Other pertinent documents pertaining to the use of Gwynedd Meeting facilities, including: The Policy and Procedure for the Use of Gwynedd Friends Meeting Facilities, the Request and Agreement Form, and the Hold Harmless Form.

The Committee for Clearness for Marriage is also responsible for:

- Assuring that the couple also becomes familiar with the above documents.
- Choosing a convener from the members of the committee who will be responsible for setting the times, dates and places for the meeting.
- Meeting with the couple at mutually convenient times and locations where they can talk openly and without distractions. At the initial meeting (or meetings), half of the committee meets with each member of the couple separately. After these initial meetings, the committee meets together to share comments and discuss areas they want to explore with the couple. Subsequent meetings are usually with the committee as a whole and both members of the couple present.
- Continuing to meet with the couple in the clearness process until clarity is gained. When no further meetings are deemed necessary, the committee meets together to discern clearness to proceed.
- Preparing a written report with the committee's recommendations, once clarity is gained, and presenting it for consideration to the Care and Counsel Committee for seasoning and approval. If the Care and Counsel Committee approves the report, the clerk of Care and Counsel notifies the couple and presents its recommendation, along with the couple's original letter requesting marriage under the care of Gwynedd Meeting, at the next scheduled Meeting with a Concern for Business.
- Assisting the couple in the selection of their Oversight Committee for Marriage, if advice is sought. Once the meeting has approved the marriage proceeding under its care, the

names of the Oversight Committee for Marriage are read at the next scheduled Meeting with a Concern for Business and approved by the meeting.

The Marriage Oversight Committee

The role of the Marriage Oversight Committee is to assure that the marriage is carried out in accordance with the wishes of the couple, Friends' procedures, and, if the wedding is held in the meeting house, the policies and procedures for the use of Gwynedd Friends Meeting facilities. This committee works closely with the couple to oversee all the arrangements and practicalities, including the obtaining of the applicable legal license and the Quaker Marriage Certificate. The Marriage Oversight Committee should make the couple aware of the potential time needed for these two documents, particularly if the couple is seeking to have a calligrapher prepare the Quaker Marriage Certificate.

Members of this committee usually take on the various roles during the wedding itself, welcoming those present and explaining the service, bringing the Quaker marriage certificate to the couple to be signed, reading the certificate and overseeing that everyone present signs the marriage certificate at the close of the meeting. Members of the Marriage Oversight Committee should be experienced Friends familiar with Friends' practices and Quaker weddings in general as well as the specifics of conducting weddings at Gwynedd Friends Meeting. They should be familiar with the resources listed at the end of this pamphlet.

Responsibilities

The Marriage Oversight Committee is responsible for:

- Choosing a convener from the members of the committee who will be responsible for setting the times, dates and places for the meeting.
- Meeting with the couple as needed and staying in communication with the couple regarding the specifics of the wedding on an ongoing basis.
- Explaining to the couple the guidelines, policies and procedures that apply to weddings at Gwynedd and giving the couple the necessary forms, including: The Policy and Procedure for the Use of Gwynedd Friends Meeting Facilities, the Request and Agreement Form, and the Hold Harmless Form.
- Assuring that signed copies of the appropriate forms listed above are returned to the Gwynedd Meeting Office Manager on a timely basis.
- Providing information about and advising the couple on how to obtain both the appropriate marriage license from the county as well as the Quaker Marriage Certificate that will be signed and read at the wedding ceremony.
- Discussing and reviewing the vows with the couple before the wedding.
- Advising on practical matters, including parking, ushers, child care, use of the facilities for the wedding reception, etc.
- Overseeing the rehearsal.
- Helping the couple decide who they would like to have sit on the facing benches during the wedding.

- Discussing with the couple who on the committee (or others) the couple want to take on the various roles during the wedding itself: welcoming and opening the meeting, bringing the marriage certificate to the couple for signature, reading the marriage certificate once the couple has signed it, and, after the wedding, arranging for everyone present to sign the marriage certificate.
- Making sure that the marriage license is promptly signed by the couple and at least two members of the Oversight Committee immediately following the ceremony.
- Forwarding the signed license to the county courthouse where the license was obtained within the legal time limit.
- Having the Quaker Marriage Certificate copied to 8 1/2 x 11" archival paper and a copy given to the recorder of Gwynedd Friends Meeting.
- Assuring that financial obligations to the meeting related to the wedding and/or use of the facilities are met.
- Preparing a written report signed by all members of the Oversight Committee for Marriage and presenting the report at the next Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business stating that the marriage has been suitably accomplished with reverence and in good order, and whether the legal requirements have been satisfied and the certificate properly recorded.
- Helping the couple make appropriate arrangements for setting up the room or rooms for the wedding, arranging for clean up before and after the wedding, and making sure the facilities are put back in order when the ceremony is over.
- Advising the couple about possible outside resources and services (catering, janitorial, child care, or other) the couple may wish to hire.
- Continuing to be available to the couple for support. The committee is encouraged to follow up on a regular basis with the couple as long as they are a part of the meeting community.

RESOURCES

Recommended for Couples Considering Marriage at Gwynedd Friends Meeting:

The Gwynedd Friends Meeting website: www.gwyneddmeeting.org

“Marriage at Gwynedd Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends,” Revised 2011.
[This pamphlet].

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice*, 1997.

Peterson, Ruth. “The Nurture of Quaker Marriages,” in *Friends Journal*, June, 2009.

“The Policy and Procedure for the Use of Gwynedd Friends Meeting Facilities,” “The Request and Agreement Form” and “The Hold Harmless Form” are available from the Office Manager Gwynedd Friends Meeting at 215 699-3055 or at gwyneddfriends@verizon.net.

Other Resources

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends website: www.pym.org

Friends General Conference website: www.fgcquaker.org

“A Quaker Marriage,” [Pamphlet] Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1515 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102-1479, 215 241-7000.

“Friends and Weddings,” [Pamphlet] Quaker Press of Friends General Conference, Reprinted 2005, 1216 Arch Street, 2B, Philadelphia, PA 19107 or online: www.quakerbooks.org.
Grounded in God: Care and Nurture in Friends Meetings, pgs. 71-105, Patricia McBee, ed. Quaker Press, Friends General Conference, 2002.

Hoffman, Jan. “Clearness in Double Discernment: Membership and Marriage,” in *Companions Along the Way*. Florence Ruth Kline and Marty Grundy, eds. Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 2000.

“Marriage and Commitment,” Excerpt from *Faith and Practice*, Southeastern Yearly Meeting, 2005. SEYM, P.O. Box 510795, Melbourne Beech, FL 32951-0795 or online: www.seym.org.

New England Yearly Meeting. *Living with Oneself and Others: Working Papers on Aspects of Family Life*. New England Yearly Meeting, revised edition 2002.

Revised November 11, 2014 Cyndy Levy and Carol Ritting