

# SPECIAL OCCASIONS

## Yearly Meeting First Approval 7/16/2016

### I. Marriages

#### *Friends Understanding of Marriage and Family Life*

We earnestly advise and encourage Friends to wait upon the Lord for counsel and guidance before starting any procedure for marriage, for it is a union not to be undertaken lightly. True happiness and joy in marriage depend first on the presence of devoted love, a love which is not merely of a passing attraction, but which includes a genuine respect for the individuality, personality, and spirituality of the other.

Marriage is a religious commitment by two people before God to be undertaken in God's Light and with reverent attention to God's counsel and guidance. Of utmost importance is a spiritual union where there is a mutual desire to open heart and home to the Spirit of God. Friends regard marriage as a continuing religious commitment and more than a simple contract.

A well-founded marriage is a source of strength, security, and joy, not only to the couple and their families, but also to the meeting and community, and to all with whom they share their lives. Parents should be concerned to provide such an atmosphere of loving care that all in the family are encouraged to grow in religious faith and practice. We counsel all family members to seek to live in such a spirit of openness and humility among themselves that barriers may not arise to good communication and to growth in love.

Great care needs to be exercised that the union be established and continued on the foundation of true love and respect. Even when the marriage relationship may fail to achieve its highest possibilities and unhappiness develops, we believe that by patient and prayerful determination, these obstacles in many cases can be overcome. The Meeting, through the original clearness committee or a new committee, can often provide support for the couple at these times. Professional counseling may also be of assistance.

The Friends wedding ceremony reflects our understanding that marriage is a covenant made by the couple themselves, and completed and blessed by God. The simple Friends wedding ceremony, where the two concerned make their promises within the framework of a meeting for worship without the need for a third person to officiate, is the natural expression of our way of

life in the Spirit. In the presence of God, and with the support and prayers of their family and friends, they take each other as life partners, asking God's blessing in this new life of theirs.

To be married "under the care" (see Glossary) of a meeting implies a continuing relationship among the couple, the meeting and God to nurture and sustain the marriage. The procedures of a Quaker wedding embody understandings of this relationship that developed early in our history and continue to be relevant in the present day. The steps leading up to the wedding day itself are an example of the corporate discernment that is central to the faith and practice of Friends. The elements of the wedding ceremony give testimony to Quaker understandings of our relationship to God and each other, especially that a marriage is a divine work, not an outward form or human declaration.

### ***Marriage Procedure***

In order to do all that it can to assure the stability and happiness of couples who are married under the care of its member monthly meetings, the Yearly Meeting outlines the following recommended procedure preliminary to a wedding:

The couple desiring to marry presents a letter, signed by both of them, to the monthly meeting under whose care they wish to be married, stating that they intend marriage with each other. This letter is read in the face of the meeting for business, and a "clearness committee" is appointed.

The original purpose of clearness committees, from which their name is derived, was to ascertain whether the applicants were free of conflicting marriage engagements. Today, in addition to these responsibilities, such committees should be concerned to do what they can to help the couple achieve a stable and happy marriage. Between the committee and the couple there will be a shared, felt sense of clarity of the rightness of the proposed marriage. The committee should endeavor to give any assistance or counsel which the couple may need. It is also recommended that the meeting maintain a small up-to-date and accessible collection of resources on marriage to be made available to the couple contemplating marriage.

If the couple belong to different monthly meetings, primary responsibility for the clearness process for the couple rests with the meeting where the wedding will take place. A second letter, also signed by the couple, is in that case sent to the other monthly meeting, requesting that a report on their member's clearness for marriage be forwarded to the meeting that will have care of the wedding. If only one of the couple belongs to a monthly meeting, that meeting undertakes the clearness process for each individual and the couple.

In the course of the clearness process, it may become clear that marriage “under the care of the meeting” is not right for this couple. It may be that a wedding “after the manner of Friends” (see Glossary) but not actually “under the care of the meeting” would be appropriate. In this case, the monthly meeting should appoint a committee to work with the couple to make appropriate arrangements.

When the clearness committee reports to the monthly meeting that everything is in order, the monthly meeting selects an oversight committee (see Glossary) which will have oversight of the wedding and at the request of the couple will appoint a time and place for the meeting for worship at which the wedding will take place. (This may be at a regular worship or at a special time and place.) This committee should meet with the couple to discuss plans for the wedding (and reception, if on meeting premises) which should be carried out with dignity, reverence, and simplicity.

The oversight committee, in conjunction with the monthly meeting clerk, also has the responsibility of informing themselves as to the legal requirements for marriage, and of seeing to it that the couple is aware of them and that they are carried out in adequate time. After the wedding, the committee has the certificate recorded in the permanent minutes of the meeting, sees that the legal report is sent to the appropriate government office, and reports to the monthly meeting when the wedding has been accomplished, whether it proceeded according to Friends’ practices, and the correct full names of the newly married couple.

### ***The Wedding***

The wedding itself, as stated before, takes place in a meeting for worship. It is the custom that all members of a meeting are invited to attend a wedding held under the care of that meeting. After the meeting is settled the couple rise, take each other by the hand, and repeat to each other their promises. These may be specially approved by the monthly meeting, or they may be the traditional Quaker promise: “In the presence of God, and before these our friends, I take thee, \_\_\_\_\_, to be my spouse, promising with Divine assistance to be unto thee a loving and faithful spouse so long as we both shall live.”

The marriage certificate is then signed by the couple and is read aloud by a person selected beforehand. At the close of the meeting, all persons present are invited to sign the certificate as witnesses.

The form of the certificate in essence is as follows. Specific changes may be approved by the monthly meeting.

Whereas, A. B. of \_\_\_\_\_, in the County/City of \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_, child

of C. B. and H., of \_\_\_\_\_; and D. E., of \_\_\_\_\_, in the County/City of \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_, child of F. E. and N., of \_\_\_\_\_; having declared their intentions of marriage with each other to \_\_\_\_\_ Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends held at \_\_\_\_\_, according to the good order used among them, their proposed marriage was allowed by that Meeting. These are to certify to whom it may concern, that for the accomplishment of their intention, this \_\_\_\_\_ day of the \_\_\_\_\_ month, in the year \_\_\_\_\_, they, A. B. and D. E. appearing in a public meeting for worship of the Religious Society of Friends, held at \_\_\_\_\_, and taking one another by the hand, did on this solemn occasion, each declare and promise with Divine assistance, to be unto the other a loving and faithful spouse so long as they both shall live [or words to that effect]. Moreover, they, A. B. and D. E. did, as a further confirmation thereof, then and there to these presents, set their hands. A.B.

D.B. (or D. E.)

We, having been present at the marriage, have as witnesses set our hands the day and year above written.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### ***Summary of Responsibilities for weddings under the care of the monthly meeting***

#### The Persons to be Married

- To write a letter to their monthly meeting(s) stating their intention to marry and asking that the wedding be under the care of the monthly meeting. Both persons should sign the letter(s).
- To meet with the appointed clearness committee(s) to seek together the right ordering (see Glossary) of the proposed marriage.
- To inform the monthly meeting of the desired date and place for the wedding and of suggestions for persons to serve on the oversight committee for the wedding.
- To refrain from sending wedding invitations until the monthly meeting minutes its approval of the proposed wedding and appoints a meeting for worship for that purpose.
- To meet with the oversight committee to discuss plans for the wedding, including any departures from usual Friends procedures or practices. If there is to be a reception on meeting premises following the meeting for worship, those plans should be discussed as well.
- To have a Friends wedding certificate prepared well in advance of the appointed day, and to see that it and appropriate pens for signing are present at the wedding itself.
- To inform themselves of the legal requirements for marriage in the state where the wedding will take place, and take appropriate steps to comply with them (if the wedding

is to be a legal ceremony in addition to a religious one).

- To commit to memory the promises to be made to each other at the wedding.
- To sign the wedding certificate after their promises have been made.

#### Clerk of Meeting

- To see that the letter from the couple and the report of the clearness committee(s) are promptly brought to the meeting for business.
- To see that an oversight committee is appointed when a favorable clearness report has been received and accepted, and that the request for a meeting for worship to accomplish the wedding is approved.
- To inform the couple when their request for a meeting for worship has been granted and they may proceed with their plans.
- To see that the marriage license is properly signed (if the wedding is to be a legal ceremony in addition to a religious one).

#### Clearness Committee

- To meet with the couple intending to marry and satisfy itself that there is nothing to interfere with the prospect of a rightly ordered marriage. This usually involves meeting with each person separately as well as with the couple together.
- To report its findings to the meeting for business in a timely fashion.
- To be informed of the legal requirements for marriage, and if the wedding is intended to be a legal as well as religious ceremony, to be prepared to discuss these requirements with the couple.
- To ensure that the rights and welfare of any minor children of either person have been considered and protected.
- To be available to help the couple in other ways, as the need appears.

#### Oversight Committee

- To see that the wedding is accomplished in accordance with a meeting for worship and in keeping with Friends practices and principles generally.
- To meet with the couple in advance to discuss plans for the wedding, including any changes in wording of the vows and selecting persons to read the certificate and to bring the meeting to a close at the appropriate time.
- To see that all legal requirements are met, if the wedding is to be a legal ceremony as well as a religious one.
- To care for the Friends wedding certificate after the rise of worship, including seeing that everyone present has an opportunity to sign it.
- To see that the wedding is recorded in the permanent records of the monthly meeting, and to see that the certificate is returned to the couple at an appropriate time.

- To report to the monthly meeting when the wedding has been accomplished, whether it proceeded according to Friends practices, and the correct full names of the newly married couple.
- To see that the reception, if held on meeting premises, is conducted in a manner appropriate to the occasion which it celebrates.

## **II. Deaths**

### **Health Care Decisions and Final Affairs**

Friends are advised to be careful to make or revise their wills and settle their outward affairs while in health. It is also advised that Friends consider executing an Advanced Health Care Directive or similar legal document covering end-of-life health care decisions.

### **Assisting the Family**

The local meeting can assist the family that has suffered a loss by death in a wide variety of ways, including: providing child care, preparing meals, doing house and yard work, and offering overnight hospitality to out-of-town visitors. At times simply accompanying the bereaved in accomplishing necessary decisions and activities may be very helpful. Remember that pain and loss do not end with the interment or memorial meeting; regular visitation during the weeks and months following can be greatly appreciated.

### **Interments**

An interment in Friends practice, whether of body or ashes, may be either private or public. In either event, a brief meeting for worship after the manner of Friends is held. The monthly meeting can usefully appoint one or more seasoned Friends to have oversight of this meeting and its closing.

### **Memorial Meetings**

A memorial meeting for worship, celebrating the life and service of the deceased Friend, is appointed by the monthly meeting (unless the deceased had previously expressed otherwise). This should be an occasion when temporal things are secondary, when the reality and mystery of eternal life is deeply felt, and when the presence of the Lord brings hope, comfort, and consolation to the bereaved. This meeting may be held at any time from the date of death to a date several weeks following, depending on the wishes of the family and the number of out-of-town F/friends and family who might wish to attend.

The memorial meeting may be held in the meeting house, or at some other facility if the meeting

space is unavailable or unable to hold the number of persons anticipated to be present. The monthly meeting should also appoint greeters and if needed persons to help with parking and seating. The monthly meeting should ensure that house-sitting is in place during the memorial meeting, particularly if the time and date of the meeting have been publicly announced.

Memorial meetings are held under the care of Ministry and Oversight Committee. Because some of the attenders are likely to be unfamiliar with the practices of Friends, a seasoned Friend should be designated to offer a brief explanation of Friends worship at the beginning of the meeting, with an invitation for any to speak if so led, whether a Friend or not. The Friend responsible for closing the meeting should be sensitive both to allowing opportunity for all to speak who are so led and to avoid allowing the memorial meeting to extend too long after that point.

Friends are urged to conform to true simplicity in all funeral arrangements, avoiding expensive and elaborate caskets and floral or other decorations. Ordinarily, the casket or container of ashes is not part of a memorial meeting for worship.

It is hospitable to offer refreshments after the memorial meeting. The monthly meeting should take the lead in providing these, within the limits of its ability.

### **Recording the Death of Members**

It is the responsibility of each monthly meeting to see that the death of any member is recorded in its minutes or other suitable permanent record. This minute may also outline the life and service of the deceased Friend.

### **Memorials**

There are particular Friends whose faithfulness to God's call in their lives inspires others. On occasion, a monthly meeting feels led to recognize and record the life of these Friends in order to help others serve God better. If the deceased Friend's life has been exemplary in service to the meeting or to the community, or as a vessel of mercy, compassion and grace, the monthly meeting may decide to publish a memorial in leaflet or pamphlet form. Collections of memorials from previous years may be seen in the Friends Historical Collection at Guilford College or at the Rich Square Monthly Meeting library.

The monthly meeting may forward the proposed memorial to the Interim Body for review and approval when the deceased Friend's life and service has been of outstanding note to the yearly meeting or to the Religious Society of Friends at large. At its discretion, the Interim Body may in turn forward the memorial, along with any suggested amendments, to the Yearly Meeting in session. If it is approved there, it may be printed for distribution. It has been the practice of the

Yearly Meeting to underwrite a portion of the expense of printing memorials approved in this way.

### **III. Other Special Occasions**

In addition to marriages and deaths, there may be other special occasions we recognize as significant for the meeting community and feel appropriate to acknowledge. Such special occasions are those which may arise in the life events of the members or for the meeting community as a whole -- births, life transitions, thanksgivings and reconciliations, times of apprehension, celebrations of solidarity with one another, our neighbors, and creation, etc. When a meeting discerns such special occasions in its life, a called meeting for worship may be appointed.