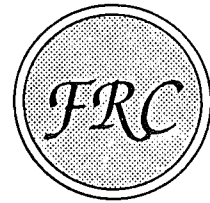


# PASTORAL CARE NEWSLETTER



PUBLISHED BY THE FAMILY RELATIONS COMMITTEE  
OF PHILADELPHIA YEARLY MEETING

*For Overseers, Members of Ministry and Counsel, and others involved  
in pastoral care and counseling*

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## Clearness Committees for Marriage or Commitment

by Jan Hoffman

Our clearness process for marriage or commitment reflects our essential belief about the way in which Friends test the religious call of two persons into a lifelong relationship, as well as our belief about the meaning of spiritual commitment within a faith community.

Early Friends were clear that marriage was essentially a religious covenant. They saw this as quite different from marriage as a legal or social relationship; when a choice was necessary, they chose to have their marriages considered illegal rather than modify their religious witness. In 1669 George Fox described it this way: *"For the right joining in 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."*

So early Friends held the witness that no person had the legal (magistrate) or spiritual (priest) authority to "pronounce" two people married. Marriage was accomplished when a meeting witnessed two people exchanging vows, confirming a call to lifelong commitment.

However, 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?" (The question is not, "Are we clear to take the *wedding* or *ceremony* 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.

### When does the clearness process begin?

For some meetings, the process begins when the couple writes a letter to the clerk requesting marriage or commitment under the care of the meeting. For others, the process begins with the couple before any letter is written. Baltimore Yearly Meeting's *Faith and Practice* contains a series of questions to be considered by the couple *before* asking the meeting to take the relationship under its care. These focus on some of the same subjects that are likely to be explored in the actual clearness process, including spiritual life and religious beliefs, gender roles, finances, jobs, children, wider family connections, and conflict resolution. Baltimore then adds two additional questions to be considered by the couple before approaching the Monthly meeting:

- *Why are we asking the approval and oversight of the meeting? Are we aware that oversight of our marriage by the meeting involves the continuing concern for our life together and the values established in our home? Will we welcome the continuing concern of the meeting?*

•How significant to us are the promises made in the presence of God and of our family and friends as stated during the Meeting for Marriage?

Even before a couple considers such questions, the meeting may wish to share with them any distinction made in its policies between requests for marriage "under the care of the meeting" and requests for the use of the meeting house as a setting for a wedding that is not under the care of Friends.

#### Who should serve on the clearness committee?

Some meetings have experienced committees focused on family life from whose membership all clearness committees come. Other meetings have committees with a larger pastoral care focus whose responsibility it is to suggest persons -- from the committee itself, and from the meeting at large -- to serve on clearness committees. Since the reality in many of our meetings is that not all persons asked to serve on clearness committees will be experienced in this service, they can be helped by being given materials about the clearness process and the qualities needed for such service.

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Family Relations Committee pamphlet *In the Presence of God and These Our Friends: A Quaker Marriage* offers questions and advices helpful to those asked to serve on clearness committees in clarifying the rightness of this service for them. Clearness committee members must be committed to the spiritual and temporal energy needed to test a call to marriage: "It is less than caring to fail in honoring the importance of [the couple's] decision by proceeding with a shallow or superficial clearness process. A clearness process carried out with integrity, under the leading of the Spirit, must draw from us a careful probing, undergirded with loving concern; a genuine desire to be of help, accompanied by a light touch; and a firm understanding of the seriousness of the joint effort we are undertaking, coupled with a relaxed, non-judgmental atmosphere."

This Newsletter is published quarterly by the Family Relations Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, Trish Walat, clerk. Comments and suggestions are always welcome. **Please do not duplicate.** To obtain additional copies, contact Helene Pollock, editor, at (215) 988-0140.

Once Friends are clear to serve on a given clearness committee, they may wish to discern whether to meet together first without the couple. This may be especially useful where some members of the committee have not previously served on a clearness committee, and when there are questions about the functioning of the committee. Such a meeting provides the opportunity for members of the committee to come to a common understanding of how they will work together. Will questions be given to the couple before the meeting? If so, which questions? Are there additional questions not printed anywhere that the committee feels are important? Will the committee meet with the two individuals separately as well as with the couple together? If either has children by a previous marriage, is it appropriate to include them in the clearness process? Does anyone on the clearness committee have strong feelings which may get in the way of listening to this particular couple? Finally, legal requirements differ in different states and it is necessary that the committee be clear on what these are.

#### Meeting with the couple both as individuals and together

The clearness process can also reflect Friends' sense that commitment between two individuals is *both* the individual leading of each person *and* the couple's leading together. This is accomplished by having two members of the clearness committee meet individually with each person in the couple before the committee meets with the couple together. Historically, the two women met with the woman, and the two men met with the man, then all four met with the couple.

Only five of our North American Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practices* still mention this step as part of the clearness process, and I believe that without it, the clearness process is weakened. Meeting with the individuals in the couple both separately and together affirms two significant realities: first, that there are two individuals, each with his or her leading, and secondly, that there is a *joint* leading affirmed by the full Committee meeting with the couple. I have spoken with couples who have met only as a couple with the clearness committee, as well as with couples who have been met with both as individuals and as a couple. In the latter case, the consciousness of

## Resources of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Family Relations Committee

Couple Enrichment Weekends, led by Pat McBee and Brad Sheeks, will be offered in Cape May, N.J. On June 2-4. The program is open to all couples. The following weekend, June 9-11, is for couples who have previously participated. The first fall weekend, open to all couples, will be October 13-15.

*An idea for your Meeting to consider: Why not offer the gift of an all-expense-paid couple enrichment weekend to each couple who is married under your care? One meeting we know of makes such a gift a regular part of their meeting's expression of support for couples under its care.*

Workshops are available for individual meeting committees, or for the meeting as a whole, on such topics as strengthening the meeting as a caring community, enhancing communication and creative listening, or dealing with anger and conflict.

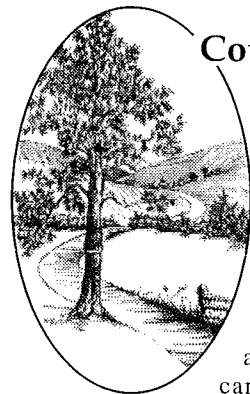
Counseling is provided by the Friends Counseling Service to individuals, couples and families. Counselors have experience in dealing with all types of issues facing couples, as well as any concerns related to family relationships.

Consultation is provided by experienced persons to Overseers on issues of pastoral care, including concerns related to the process of clearness for marriage, or questions about the meaning of marriage.

For information regarding fees, consultation and scheduling of workshops, contact Steve Gulick, FRC Program Coordinator, at 215-988-0140.

### Other Programs and Opportunities

Friends General Conference has organized a training program for couple enrichment leaders. It will be offered June 24-28 in Alma, MI, and June 25-29 in Cape May, NJ, with Brad Sheeks and Pat McBee.



### Could Pendle Hill on the Road . . . be on your road?

Pendle Hill on the Road (PHOR) is designed to be of service to meetings that are at such a distance that members cannot easily participate in

Pendle Hill on-campus weekend events.

A PHOR weekend provides your meeting with a chance to grow in understanding as a community as you discuss a topic of mutual interest or work through, in a relaxed and prayerful manner, a meeting difficulty or concern.

Pendle Hill provides the leadership—your meeting provides the space to meet and the participants. Cost per person is reasonable.

For more information contact

Bobbi Kelly (800) 742-3150 · FAX (610) 566-3679

PENDLE HILL · A CENTER FOR STUDY AND CONTEMPLATION  
338 Plush Mill Road · Wallingford, Pennsylvania 19086

### Printed Resources

Published by the Family Relations Committee:

- *In the Presence of God . . . A Quaker Marriage.*
- *Marriage in the Light: Reflections on Commitment and the Clearness Process*, by Elizabeth Watson.
- *Resource Guide to be used by a Same-Sex Couple and their Monthly Meeting's Committee on Clearness.*

Published by Pendle Hill

- "Marriage: A Spiritual Leading for Lesbian, Gay and Straight Couples," by Leslie Hill.

Published by New England Yearly Meeting

- "Living with Oneself and Others," New England Yearly Meeting.

(The above resources are in the FGC catalog).

Also from Jan Hoffman

"On Marriage: No Safe Dallying with Truth," originally in *Friends Bulletin*, October, 1989. (Send \$1.50 to FRC to get a copy.)

## Meetings Take the Clearness Process Seriously

**Do we believe that a thorough clearness process should be carried out with every couple seeking to be married in the manner of Friends?**

That question came before **Richland Meeting** during a recent business meeting. A couple had asked to be married under the care of another meeting, *without* a clearness process. The couple wanted the wedding to be held in Richland Meeting. "We often don't reach consensus very quickly in our meeting," noted Ellen Schroy, an Overseer at Richland Meeting, "but we quickly came to agreement at business meeting. Some couples spoke to the fact that the clearness process had helped them. They felt very strongly about its importance. We affirmed that anyone being married under our roof will go through clearness." This decision was a re-affirmation of Richland's usual policy. They have a lovely, historic meetinghouse, and there are many visitors and attenders. "We try to accept new people with open arms," explains Ellen, "and we try to be open to the couples who want to be married here, but we tell them that they must be willing to go through the clearness process, and that it is not unusual for the process to take three to six months." Ellen says that many couples lose interest once they discover what is involved, but some stick with it and learn about Friends in this way.

At **Mullica Hill Meeting** it is a tradition that at least one person in the couple should be a member of the meeting in order for the couple to be married under the care of the meeting. "We don't want to be inhospitable," explains Judy Suplee, clerk of Overseers, "and we don't like to say no, but we have made only one exception to this policy in the 35-40 years of my adult membership in the meeting, and that was some years ago, for someone who was from a Quaker family that we all knew." In one recent situation, neither person was a member or attender at a meeting, but one of them had attended Friends schools and felt a close tie to Friends. They had already set a date three months hence. The clerk spent time with the couple, and although the meeting was not able to undertake oversight of the marriage, the couple seemed satisfied about the way the situation was handled.

If the clearness process is taken seriously, sometimes the answer will be no. Ken Cook of **Exeter Meeting** recalls not approving the request of a couple who wanted to be married under the care of the meeting because their relationship was very young. "We felt they needed more time," says Ken. Ken does not regret their decision. The couple ended up not marrying.

Advice from Paul Joyce Collins Williams of **Harrisburg Meeting** is as follows: "Take your time. Don't feel afraid to ask for a second or even a third meeting." Paul was part of a clearness committee that met a number of times with one couple. Individual committee members (including Paul) also invited the couple to their homes for additional meetings. The committee asked to examine divorce decrees and dealt openly with legal issues as well as with personal matters. "We really wanted thoroughness, to make sure that the couple had discussed various issues, not necessarily that they had come to any particular conclusions," explains Paul. "We believe that Friends have a legitimate process, and it's worth spending time on."

Couples -- even Quaker couples -- may be surprised to discover that clearness is serious business. Esther Curtis of **Wrightstown Meeting** recalls dealing with a young Quaker couple who wanted to change the traditional wedding vows. Since they assumed that both of their meetings would let them do whatever they wanted, they were very surprised when some of their ideas were not approved. "But," recalled Esther, "they were also impressed that we cared enough to spend the time to talk it through."

[*Note:* Judy Suplee of Mullica Hill Meeting also describes developing new wording for a certificate for a "meeting for celebration." The actual non-Friends wedding was planned in another city a few months prior to the "meeting for celebration" at Mullica Hill Meeting. Contact the Family Relations Committee (215-988-0540) to get a copy of the wording for this non-traditional certificate.]

themselves both as individuals and as part of a couple which emerged as a result of their clearness process was an unexpected and valuable benefit.

New England Yearly Meeting's *Living With Oneself and Others* offers an example of the way in which the focus of different questions can indicate the many paths to clearness. In the chapter "To Those Contemplating Marriage," questions are divided into three sections: (1) for the committee to ask the couple, (2) for the couple to consider together, and (3) for each individual to consider. For example, questions to ask the couple include: "In the years to come, how do *you* plan to seek the Divine assistance *you* will invoke in *your* marriage vows?" Questions for the couple together include: "Have *we* lovingly and prayerfully considered the differences in values, needs and habits between *us*?" Some questions for individuals are: "What is *my* present image of marriage? Am I open to changing this image as reality dictates? What relationship does this image have to *my* parents' marriage or to an earlier marriage of *my* own?"

#### **What are some possible questions to be explored?**

Books and pamphlets with sample questions are available. (See insert.) It may be well to discover which resources the couple are already familiar with, and to draw their attention to additional resources as well. It is also necessary to establish whether the clearness committee assumes that the couple will be prepared to address a certain set of questions when the committee meets with them. It may also be that the couple has questions they wish the clearness committee to consider before meeting with them. Of course when the committee and the couple meet, responses to given questions will engender further questions.

One question needing an affirmative response from everyone is: Are we prepared to have as many meetings as necessary to reach clearness?

It is important for the clearness committee to focus on what they believe are the essential questions for the particular couple. There can be a great difference in age, maturity, and life experience among couples asking the meeting to take their relationship under its care. An essential question for one couple may be totally irrelevant to another. Further, would the couple

appreciate many questions, or might they be overwhelmed by too many questions? I know of clearness committees who have created a customized one-page list of questions for a particular couple. I have also known couples who wanted to address as many questions as they could possibly find.

New situations generate a need for new questions. In my meeting, for example, we have minuted our willingness to take same-gender relationships under our care. In our considerations of what this would mean for the clearness process, we experienced a need for new questions. To the questions in a one-page foldout from North Carolina Yearly Meeting (FUM), we added the following: *Are you seeking a spiritual union, a legal union, or both? If you cannot have or do not want a state-recognized union, are you aware of the many legal contracts which can be drawn up to provide rights similar to those that are part of a legally-recognized union?* This question recognizes that in addition to same-gender couples whose unions cannot be legalized, there are some heterosexual couples who do not wish to claim a legal privilege not extended to all couples.

In minuting our willingness to take same-gender relationships under our care, my meeting was not clear to use only one name for such relationships. For some in the meeting, marriage is a term that belongs only to heterosexuals. For others, marriage is a name for a corrupt institution and they wish to use a name to which a more positive meaning can be given. Some heterosexual couples do not wish to use a term that cannot be used by all. For yet others, marriage is a term which confers on same-gender relationships the same spiritual weight that heterosexual relationships have and they wish to claim that spiritual equality, even when legal equality is not granted. Given the potential of different leadings about the name of the relationship, we left that spiritual naming as a question to be addressed in the clearness committee.

The reality of divorce among us may lead to another question to be addressed in the clearness process: that of changing the vows. My own New England Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice* states that a couple's desire to change the traditional vows must be raised with the clearness committee, and I concur with this requirement. I have heard the suggestion that "as long as we both shall love" is a more reasonable vow than "as long as we both shall

live," given the statistics on divorce. I disagree, believing that the marriage vows are promises made to each other in the hope that they will be kept. The people of Israel made a promise to be faithful to God -- which they repeatedly broke. As an individual, I have made promises to God to be faithful, yet sometimes I have not been faithful. The fact of promises broken does not mean I promise less in the future. I do not want to say, "I make this covenant with you, God, for as long as I can keep it." I want to promise, "I will try always to be faithful," knowing that I will sometimes fall short, but wanting to affirm my deepest desire.

#### Possible Outcomes.

The most common outcome of the clearness process is, of course, that the meeting takes the relationship under its care. However, as North Pacific Yearly Meeting (1993) says, "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." Again, the clarity is a double clarity; *either* the couple *or* the committee may be clear to proceed or not.

*Sometimes the clearness process helps the couple find themselves not clear to proceed.* In one meeting I know, a clearness committee was meeting with a couple composed of a woman who had grown up in that meeting and a man from another country. The committee posed the question to the woman, "Are you planning to continue working after you are married?" "Of course," she replied. The man turned to her, amazed. "You are?" he asked. Following this exchange, the clearness committee just sat and listened as the couple discovered many contrary assumptions they held about their life after their wedding, assumptions each had not known the other held. As a result of that clearness process, the couple withdrew their request.

*Sometimes the clearness committee is clear that the meeting should not take the relationship under its care.* In another meeting, the clearness committee met with a couple and reported to the meeting their recommendation that the meeting not take this marriage under its care, though the couple still insisted they were clear to marry. The clearness committee indicated why they felt the meeting could not promise to support this marriage. The couple's blindness

to each other's reality, together with their incapacity to recognize their own lack of awareness meant that there was no common understanding which the meeting could support. The meeting's response was to say, "How can we judge other people's leadings; they know what they're doing, they want to get married. Who are we to say that it won't work?" So the meeting went ahead and approved the marriage of the couple under the care of the meeting. Three months after the wedding the marriage broke up for precisely the reasons the clearness committee had given.

In conclusion, it is important to remember our sense that the primary purpose of a meeting for worship for marriage or celebration of commitment is to witness a covenant being made between two persons, an affirmation of their spiritual call to relationship and the meeting's call to support it. We cannot *marry* anyone, but we *can* affirm the call of two individuals to marry. We do this by taking the relationship under our care, and by our witness of a covenant two people make in a meeting for worship. In this way, we can be part of a continuing search for the variety of ways we can live in faithfulness.

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*Jan Hoffman, a member of Mt. Toby Meeting, is clerk of Ministry and Counsel of New England Yearly Meeting, and former clerk of NEYM. She is a frequent speaker and workshop leader in a wide range of Friendly settings.*

#### Queries

1. What concrete steps might we take so that the clearness process in our meeting could be strengthened?
2. Are we aware of resources -- both printed material and "people resources"-- that we can turn to in case a particular clearness process presents an unexpected challenge?
3. Are we open to the possibility that clarity might mean not to proceed in the way in which the couple expects things to go?
4. What might we do to provide more support for couples in the meeting? (See article by Patricia McBee in Volume I No. 2 of *Pastoral Care Newsletter*).