

Pastoral Care *Newsletter*

*For Overseers, Ministry and Counsel,
and others who provide pastoral care
in unprogrammed Friends meetings*

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Seeking Clearness on Same Gender Marriage

by Karen Stewart with contributions from members of the PCN editorial committee

For the past twenty years Friends have been asking meetings to take under their care same-gender couples who feel led to be married. One by one, across the nation, meetings are taking up this question, seeking to be faithful to Friends belief in the continuing revelation of Truth.

Rarely does an issue of such magnitude come our way. Rarely are we called to reconsider a practice that has been such an important part of our cultural and spiritual heritage. We are challenged to reconcile an apparent conflict between our understanding of our biblical heritage and custom on the one hand and, on the other hand, our testimony on equality and belief in that of God in everyone.

Wrestling with this question poses an opportunity to open our hearts and minds, to examine our beliefs and to use our process of discernment to find our measure of Truth today. With tenderness and care we may find that wrestling with the issue deepens and strengthens our faith and our community, regardless of where the meeting comes down on the original question.

Some Brief Background

Quakers believe that God calls and unites a couple in marriage. Traditionally we offer assistance in the form of clearness committees to help the couple carefully consider their intent to marry. We provide the worshipful setting for their marriage to occur. We serve as witnesses to the process and take the marriage under our care, providing support to the couple in their spiritual journey together. While most of us seem in unity that the spiritual authority to marry rests with the Divine, our monthly meetings do hold the awesome responsibility of deciding whether or not to take marriages under their care.

Meetings come to consider same gender marriages in many different ways with widely varying experiences. In some meetings the rightly ordered path seems quite clear. In others deep searching is required.

In some meetings, two loved and cherished members of the same gender ask to be married and the meeting



Karen Stewart

simply considers the request as they would a request from a heterosexual couple. Many meetings decide to take up the concern in the absence of a formal request for marriage, in order to avoid the possibility of saying no to a specific couple or of making a couple wait while the meeting discerns the way forward. Some meetings take it up because of a request from the yearly meeting, because of epistles from Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns, or because a member or group of members have a leading to bring this concern forward. For some meetings the process feels comfortable and natural while others may struggle painfully for years. However, even meetings who struggle for years often find that the process has deepened and strengthened their community. Careful attention can enhance the probability that the process is one that will enrich and enliven a meeting regardless of the outcome.

Fear and anger have sometimes posed stumbling blocks in discussing this issue. Gay and lesbian Friends may feel hesitant to make themselves vulnerable to others, fearing judgement and hostility. For some Friends, even

examining the question may feel like a betrayal of long held convictions. All may share the fear that considering the issue could divide the meeting or jeopardize the meeting's standing in the community. Friends may feel vulnerable and confused. Fear can lead to anger which can cause even more difficulty. Love can cast out fear and we must constantly return to that loving and tender place where Truth will be revealed. Only then will Friends feel safe enough to do this important work.

Sometimes Friends have felt led to support committed relationships of gay and lesbian members but have had difficulty reaching unity over how to *name* the relationship. Some Friends may feel the term marriage is reserved for the covenant between the Divine and a man and a woman. For some gay and lesbian Friends the word marriage carries unpleasant associations with a patriarchal society and they do not want to call their union by that term. For others, marriage best describes their commitment to each other. A lesbian friend who was married under the care of a meeting writes: "There was no other choice than to follow in the footsteps of my ancestors and create a sacred bond of marriage between Lori and myself. I know that to honor that of God within the other meant that we needed to reflect God's love to our community of faith. We did this through a public statement of our love, devotion and commitment to

having God rest in the center of our relationship. A commitment ceremony would not have been enough for me, marriage was the only choice I would make regardless of the social and religious interpretations of God's will. After all, it was God who led us to step forward in our faith and to make our choice for marriage."

Legal issues have been of concern to some meetings. Some meetings have feared the loss of legal recognition of heterosexual marriages under their care should they sanction same gender unions. Other meetings are concerned about how to advise same gender couples to obtain as many as possible of the legal rights that are automatically afforded heterosexual couples upon marriage.

Discerning Way Forward

With such an important issue, it is of utmost importance that we maintain a spirit of worship in all that we do. We may have to continually remind ourselves that we are seeking Divine Will together, not trying to convince each other of the rightness of our particular views. One lesbian friend wrote, "It is important to stress that all people need to let go of their agendas when they step through the doors of the meetinghouse and be willing and ready to listen to Spirit and to move from their

Resources for Consideration of Same Gender Marriage

Publications and videos

- "A Minute on Marriage," *The Friend*, March 1, 1996.
The Bible, The Church And The Future Of Friends: Papers From The Quaker Issues Roundtable. Edited by Chuck Fager, Pendle Hill, 1996. 240 pp. #
- Both My Moms' Names are Judy*, video produced by Lesbian and Gay Parents Association, can be ordered from GLSEN, address listed below.
- "Christians and Homosexuality: A Discussion of Biblical and Ethical Issues," *The Other Side Magazine*, 1990.* #
- "Guide for Discussions on Sexuality: A Menu Plan for Nourishing Discussions in Monthly Meetings," Committee on Sexuality of Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting, 1991.* #
- Hartford Packet on Homosexuality. prepared by Hartford Monthly Meeting, contains a variety of 26 helpful pamphlets for Friends and their meetings. #
- "Homosexuality and the Bible: An Interpretation," by Walter Barnett, **Pendle Hill Pamphlet #226.*#**
- Love Makes a Family: Lesbian And Gay Families in the Religious Society of Friends*, video from FLGC, 1992. 40 min. #
- Marriage: A Spiritual Leading for Lesbian, Gay and Straight Couples*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet #308 #
- The Moral Teaching Of Paul: Selected Issues*, by Victor Paul Furnish, Abingdon, 1983.#

- "Resource Guide to be Used by a Same-Sex Couple and by their Monthly Meeting's Committee on Clearness in the Event of Their Request for a Celebration of Commitment or Marriage." Family Relations Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1988.* #
- Sexuality: A Part of Wholeness*, by Elizabeth Watson, Published by the Family Relations Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1990.*#
- *Available from the FGC Bookstore, 800-966-4556.
#Available from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Library, 215-241-7220. Friends outside PYM can become members of the library.

Organizations

- Traveling Ministries Program, Friends General Conference, Deborah Fisch, Coordinator, 916 41st Street, Des Moines, Iowa, 50312 Phone: (515) 277-2189, debf@fgc.quaker.org
- Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns, 143 Campbell Avenue, Ithaca, NY 14850.
- Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), P.O. Box 34792, Washington, DC 20043-4792, Phone: (202) 638-4200.
- GLSEN: Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network, 121 W. 27th St. Suite 804, NY, NY, 10001 Phone: (212) 727-1035; www.glsen.org.

position if called to do so by the Divine...I know this was difficult for me because it felt like so much was at stake." Only by letting go of our positions can we truly be open to the Spirit moving among us.

Meetings may find it helpful at the start to name a group of Friends who will carefully tend the process. Ministry and Counsel, Overseers or some other established committee might do this, or a special committee could be appointed. One seasoned Friend advises, "I think the criteria for membership on the committee should be Friends who are widely respected in the meeting, who have a gift of discernment, who are open-minded and teachable, and who have a commitment to the loving and Spirit filled consideration of this concern." The goal of this committee is not to recommend a policy regarding marriage, but to provide a process to assist the meeting in discerning the leading of the Spirit.

Meetings may find it helpful to make a very tentative time frame for consideration of the issue, assemble and provide resources to be used, and ensure there are ample meetings and/or retreats to consider the issue. Resource lists and written materials may be made available. Speakers, individually or in panels, might be invited to come to meetings. Some meetings have found it helpful to have Friends from outside of their meeting facilitate discussions or worship sharing. As with any important meeting process, Friends may find it helpful to have many

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One Meeting's Experience...

Finding Unity

in Germantown Meeting

Germantown (PA) Meeting received a minute from the Family Relations Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in the spring of 1985 which gently urged that monthly meeting consider same-sex ceremonies of commitment. The meeting referred it to Worship and Ministry and to Overseers who took it up in their annual joint meeting in the fall of 1986.

Following that joint meeting, over a year passed until a Friend reminded W&M that we had not responded to the yearly meeting. Immediately a group of volunteers was gathered to produce a response. They read books, pamphlets, articles, anything that they could find in order to discuss the issue knowledgeably.

Unintentionally the group included no homosexuals, although it did include one person who thought that homosexuality was evil. A lesbian member of the meeting was added when it was brought to our attention that we had not examined the composition of the group. This was important since gay and lesbian members of the meeting had felt excluded even though the invitation to participate had been generally given and any volunteer accepted. It was a lesson in sensitivity to differing perceptions no matter what the reality.

After months of study, the group decided that the empowerment they felt from having learned so much should be shared with the meeting. This was done by a series of adult classes including a panel of meeting members of various sexual orientations and divergent views making a statements on what they looked to the meeting for in support of its members; a session was led by a heterosexual couple about their participation in the organization, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays; and a Germantown Friends School teacher presenting his class on homosexuality. All of these were well attended and meeting members clearly felt that they had a much deeper understanding of homosexuality.

Reports to Worship & Ministry and Overseers in the late spring resulted in a minute prepared for monthly meeting to consider in October 1988.

The minutes summarize the various perspectives in the meeting: "For a few Friends this minute recognized a change in social mores which they found difficult and even painful, to contemplate. These Friends see homosexuality as an unnatural relationship without Biblical precedent or social sanction, and usually impermanent. Such a relationship, they felt should not be supported by the meeting or presented to the meeting's children as an acceptable alternative.

"Many Friends, however, felt that the efforts of two people to nurture each other on the soul's journey through life should be supported regardless of the sexual

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orientation of the two people involved. Many heterosexual Friends felt unprepared to recognize only their own sexual preference as 'natural' but felt led instead to testify to their conviction that a living community must necessarily allow for a variety of ways to make love manifest."

Since some Friends seemed very troubled by the minute, it was postponed for further discussion in the December meeting. Friends were asked to share insights with one another so that we might reach clarity at that time. Gay/Lesbian Friends undertook to visit with Friends who had opposed the minute for direct but non-confrontational discussion, which had the effect of removing their misgivings. In December Germantown Meeting was able to unite on the minute.

In retrospect, we feel that the elements that made such acceptance possible were

- Germantown proceeded without haste, taking three years to reach unity. The matter was studied and presented with a vast amount of factual information.
- The gay/lesbian members of the meeting, particularly those already living in committed relationships were beloved and respected elders of the meeting. Their behavior was not discernibly different from that of heterosexuals in the meeting. They were members who carried their share of the work of the Meeting and they had the love and trust of the membership.
- The action of the gay and lesbian members in addressing directly but not with any hostility the reservations of the heterosexual members.

Other Meetings' Experiences...

PCN sought a first hand account of a meeting that came to unity on not taking same gender unions under its care. We did not find such a meeting, but rather found meetings in various conditions: (1) Many meetings have not felt called to consider this matter – no same gender couple has asked for marriage under the care of the meeting and the meeting has not felt led to consider it in the abstract. (2) Other meetings have considered same gender unions and failed to find unity. In these meetings, as is Friends custom, failure to find unity has meant remaining with the previous practice of not taking these relationships under the care of the meeting. (3) Some meetings have found unity in taking same gender relationships under their care, but not in naming those relationships "marriage."

We honor the deep and sincere search of all meetings who take up this matter with a desire to be responsive to the leadings of the Spirit. We invite readers to let us know of meetings that have felt a clear and unified leading not to take same gender relationships under their care so that we can make that information available to other readers. PCN

different ways to share and discuss the issue at times that are convenient and with childcare and transportation provided when needed.

For help in structuring the discernment process, the Committee on Sexuality of Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting has published a *Guide for Discussions on Sexuality* (available from the FGC Bookstore for \$1.50). This very helpful publication offers advice on process as well as sets of queries that cover sexuality, moral authority, marriage/committed relationships, and civil rights/discrimination. It contains references for Bible passages and queries to use in examining them. Finally, it contains an extensive reference list. It is an excellent source of help in clarifying areas of disagreement.

Attending to Your Meeting's Specific Needs

Each meeting is unique. There is no single way of threshing this issue that will work for all. Meetings vary in size and composition. It is useful to reflect on what has helped your meeting stay focused in the Spirit while considering difficult issues in the past.

Some meetings may be well steeped in biblical teachings and contemporary biblical scholarship as it pertains to marriage and homosexuality. Others may feel the need for further study to deepen their understanding.

Some meetings may have active gay and lesbian members; others may have gay and lesbian members who are unknown to them, or members may have gay or lesbian children. Some meetings may have written minutes in support of civil rights for gays and lesbians. Others may have never broached the subject. In a meeting where there is already a great deal of awareness, understanding, and sensitivity to gay and lesbian issues, the process may be far different than in a meeting where there are no openly gay or lesbian members and where the subject of homosexuality has not been explored. Given the long history of misinformation and prejudice surrounding the issue of homosexuality, it may be important to provide access to the latest information about the nature of homosexuality. (See resource list, page 2)

Individual Friends may vary in their attachment to this issue, but it is very important that it is seen as an issue for the entire meeting. One Friend writes: "This is a concern that affects all members, not only gay and lesbian members. Consideration of our commitment to our biblical heritage and to our testimony of equality can take us to the core of what it means to be a Friend."

The meeting may want to discuss openly the degree to which participation is expected in the discernment process. Many meetings have felt they were moving along, threshing the issues and coming to clearness, only to have a member, who had chosen not to participate in the threshing, step forward at the last minute to block the process. Good process requires that those who feel strongly find ample occasions both to speak and to listen

Of Interest to Overseers...

VISITING FRIENDS ARE AVAILABLE TO YOUR MEETING

As mentioned in the main article, Friends General Conference has a new program that makes visits from experienced Friends available to meetings to help them in consideration of matters that arise in the meeting's life. Meetings often work in isolation when reflecting on questions such as what to do about inadequate meeting space or how to resolve a conflict in the meeting or deepening the meeting's spiritual life.

The Coordinator of FGC's Traveling Ministries Program helps identify a Friend with the gifts and experience that would be useful to the meeting. She also assists the meeting in making arrangements for the visit. When needed, limited financial assistance can be arranged.

For more information, contact Deborah Fisch, Traveling Ministries Coordinator, (515) 277-2189 or debf@fgc.quaker.org.

DON'T FORGET PENDLE HILL WORKSHOP ON PASTORAL CARE February 6-11, 2000

Pendle Hill is offering a week-long course, *An Introduction to Pastoral Care for Quakers* led by Judy Guerry, a member of the Huntsville, Alabama Friends Meeting.

For more information call Pendle Hill (800) 742-3150, ext. 142. Scholarship aid is available.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR ON SINGLES ISSUE

We received the following letter from Mary Baier of Rockland (NY) Meeting: "Thank you for your lovely article on "Reaching Out to Singles," featured in *Pastoral Care Newsletter*. It was the answer to this single person's dreams. Ministry & Oversight read it and discussed it. We devised a questionnaire intended to get information about the needs, etc., of single members & attenders. It will go out with our newsletter.

"Your empathy and specific suggestions were helpful, as was your encouraging to reach out in real ways."

In a later phone conversation, Mary Baier wanted us to be sure to mention that sending out the questionnaire was just a beginning in their process of reaching out to single people in the meeting.

We invite other readers to write to us about actions you have taken in response to an article in *PCN*.

FRIENDS COUNSELING SERVICE

Friends Counseling Service not only provides counseling to individuals, couples, and families, but also provides consultations and workshops for meetings on issues pertaining to care of members.

A complete list of counselors appeared in the March 1999 issue of *PCN*. For information or a referral, contact Deborah Cooper, Counseling Service Consultant, at (215)248-0489.

to others. If there are Friends who seem to be avoiding the meeting's threshing of this concern, efforts can be made to engage them one on one, listening carefully to their concerns, and seeking ways to incorporate them into the meeting's process. Again, we will need to continually remind ourselves of the need to let go of our agendas and be open to the Spirit. And we will need to be ready to help others do the same.

Some meetings have found it helpful to offer committees of support for members who are feeling vulnerable, unappreciated, or marginalized by this discussion. Supportive Friends can offer love and understanding as well as encourage patience and forgiveness. For gay and lesbian members these are not abstract issues being discussed; thus, even if we proceed with a loving intent, our discussions may feel hurtful. Similarly, there may be a need to support Friends who may be having difficulty with even raising the issue. Supportive Friends can offer love and understanding and

can help these Friends to bring their concerns to the meeting in a loving and open way.

Sharing from the Heart

Consideration of same gender marriage usually occurs in the context of a broader consideration of both the nature of marriage and loving committed relationships. Knowledge of the history of marriage and most particularly marriage among Friends can provide a background for discussion and further discernment.

Worship sharing may provide the best medium for considering the topic. When we know we will have a chance to speak and be heard, when we are relieved of the burden of trying to convince others of our point of view, when we are aware that the Divine Spirit will tender our hearts to the Truth, we can all be our "best selves."

An essential component of this process is sharing our stories. Sharing in general about love and relationships

places everyone on equal footing, and out of that experience we can come to understand our similarities as well as our differences. Of utmost importance is hearing the spiritual journeys of gay and lesbian Friends. If there are Friends in a meeting willing to share their stories it is ideal; if not, meetings can seek out speakers from the wider Quaker community. Understanding and embracing our differences can be an amazing process in and of itself.

A meeting should be sensitive to the impact of this discussion on children and teens, with awareness of the needs of the different ages. The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network is an excellent organization of educators, that has a wealth of materials and resources to share. It is very important that the meeting's discussions of this issue be respectful and tender so that children may come to recognize the meeting as a safe and supportive environment as they question and grow in their own sexuality.

When Unity Is Not Found

Having followed processes such as these, some meetings will have come to a clear sense of understanding and unity on whether or not to take same gender marriages under their care. Other meetings, in spite of their most faithful efforts, may reach an impasse where way does not open for unity. If this happens, sometimes the best course is to let the consideration rest in prayer for a while with a plan to return to it at a later date. As one friend stated, "The Spirit's time is not measured by clocks or calendars."

A meeting can also call on outside resources for help. The yearly meeting may be able to offer assistance. The Traveling Ministries Program of FGC may be able to connect the meeting with a Friend skilled in dealing with this particular issue, or a seasoned Friend gifted in helping meetings process difficult issues in general.

Summary

The decision of whether or not to support gay and lesbian Friends who feel led to marry, is a sacred responsibility as well as a great opportunity to examine very important aspects of our faith. With Divine Guidance and careful attention to process, consideration of this issue can become an opportunity to deepen our faith and further our understanding of Truth. May we be aware of God's blessings on us all as we go forward with this important work.

Karen Stewart is a member of Durham (NC) Monthly Meeting where she currently serves as co-clerk. She recently completed a term as clerk of the Ministry and Nurture Committee of Friends General Conference. She has also served as clerk of Carolina Friends School. She and her husband David, both psychologists, are parents of a daughter age 17 and a son 13.

She writes of her own experience of prayerful searching on same gender marriage, "Durham Friends Meeting reached cleanness to support same gender marriages a number of years ago. The process deepened and strengthened our meeting and brought many unexpected blessings."

Questions for Reflection

1. Under what circumstances might our meeting undertake consideration of same gender marriage? If the issue of same gender marriage were raised, would the meeting be prepared to attend to it in a careful, loving, worshipful manner?
2. Is consideration of same gender marriage likely to evoke strong feelings in our meeting? If so, what has been the meeting's experience of dealing with difficult issues? What groundwork can help meeting members be open to one another and the leadings of the Spirit? Might we need to consider asking for assistance from outside of meeting to help us consider this question in light and love?
3. What background information would our meeting need in order to be prepared for considering same gender marriage? Has the meeting previously discussed homosexuality and civil rights for homosexuals? Are members acquainted with gay and/or lesbian couples? Would it be helpful to have information about the lives of gay and lesbian couples in the community? What resources can we call on to help us be better informed?
4. Does the meeting have a practice of Bible study that would prepare it for reflecting on the passages relating to homosexuality? What resources can we call on to help us wrestle with these passages?
5. Are there Friends in the meeting who can give leadership to this consideration who are widely respected in the meeting, have a gift of discernment, are open-minded and teachable, and who have a commitment to the loving and Spirit filled consideration of this concern?

Pastoral Care Newsletter is published quarterly by the Family Relations Concerns Group of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. Patricia McBee, editor. We are located at 1515 Cherry St., Philadelphia, PA 19102. Comments are welcome. **Please do not duplicate without permission.** To obtain additional copies or to subscribe, contact Steve Gulick, at 215-241-7068 or stevegulick@pym.org.