

# Pastoral Care

## Newsletter

For Member Care Committees,  
Ministry and Counsel, Overseers,  
and others who provide pastoral care  
in unprogrammed Friends' meetings.

Vol. 13, No. 3 March 2006

## Clearness Committees for Marriage or Commitment

by Jan Hoffman

*This article, a primer on marriage clearness by Jan Hoffman, first appeared in the May 1995 issue of PCN. We are reprinting it now as the first of a two-part series on marriage. This issue presents the basics of clearness for marriage. The second issue in the series will look at adapting our practice to some 21st century challenges. ed.*

**O**ur 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.



Jan Hoffman

### 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, finances, jobs, children, wider family connections and conflict resolution. Baltimore Yearly Meeting then adds ad-

ditional 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?**

In some meetings, experienced committees focused on family life provide the core from which all clearness committees are drawn. 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. This article has been prepared for that purpose as are several of the resources on page 6.

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, nonjudgmental atmosphere.

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. For same-gender couples, the clearness committee need not be entirely that gender.

Only five of our North American yearly meetings 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 met with the committee both as indi-

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viduals and as a couple. In the latter case, the consciousness of 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 to consider 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 indicates? What relationship does this

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### **One Meeting's Experience**

## **Two committed people find enrichment in the process**

by Ted Goertzel  
Medford Meeting

My fiancée, Linda, and I were apprehensive when we heard that we would have to face a "clearness committee" before we could be married in the Medford (NJ) Friends Meeting.

I am a member of the Meeting and I knew about clearness committees from reading *Faith and Practice*. I also understood how Quakers have quaint and stuffy names for processes that are actually quite friendly and informal. Linda's background is in Protestant churches where couples are counseled by a Minister. Facing a committee sounded a bit like applying for a security clearance for a government job or fellowship.

We had been living together for several years and owned our home jointly. We had not legally married because of the substantial tax penalty for two mature adults in our situation, but we had made a strong commitment to each other. Now Linda was retiring, so the penalty would be less and we felt we could afford the luxury of a formal marriage.

Two friends had just reached a similar decision after a living together for a "trial period" of twenty-five years. They chose to be married in a court house and told their friends about it only after the ceremony. But we wanted more than that. We wanted a wedding ceremony with friends and family. The Medford Friends Meeting is my community, it's where I belong and I felt a ceremony there would be meaningful.

Linda did not belong to a church, so there was no conflict about where we should go. I explained the process, as outlined in *Faith and Practice*, and she agreed that I should send a letter to get things started.

I thought the clearness committee visit would go smoothly, and it did. The two couples and one man who came to our home were people whom I had met, some of whom I knew well. We were surprised that they began by telling us about their own experiences and their relationship to the Society of Friends. This broke the ice and helped us, and especially Linda as a newcomer, to feel welcomed.

The committee wanted to be certain that there was more to our decision than tax and insurance considerations. They made sure that Linda understood the role of the meeting and was comfortable with it and they took the opportunity to encourage her to think about attending more often.

The committee's care in assuring that we understood how a Quaker wedding is conducted helped to make the wedding itself a great success. Many members of Linda's family traveled long distances to be there and to attend a Friends meeting for the first time. Discussing these things with the committee helped us to prepare them for the experience. They became very much participants in the event, not just spectators.

Looking back on the experience, I feel that the committee's carefulness and the whole Quaker process helped me to think through the spiritual implications of what we were doing. It helped to make the wedding a more enriching and fulfilling experience for both of us.

*Ted Goertzel, a Professor of Sociology at Rutgers University, Camden, was raised in Detroit and Ann Arbor, Michigan, Friends Meetings and is currently a member of the Medford Meeting. He also has experience as a clearness committee member.*

image have to my parents' marriage or to an earlier marriage of my own?"

## What Are Some Possible Questions to Be Explored?

Various books and pamphlets with sample questions are available (see resources). 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 may 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. Many meetings have minuted their willingness to take same gender relationships under their care. In our considerations of what this would mean for the clearness process in my meeting, we

*Sometimes the clearness process helps the couple find themselves clear not to proceed.*

felt 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 can rarely 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:

## We Shall All Be Changed:



Experiencing God's Love  
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*(for Friends in healthcare, the healing arts, or anyone engaged with these issues in their work, their meeting or their own life)*

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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) has said, "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.

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### **Pastoral Care Newsletter has new editor: Carol J. Suplee.**

Carol is a life-long journalist, a reporter, feature writer and editor. She has written books about aspects of local New Jersey history and people, and worked in media relations and development for Quaker institutions. She worships at Medford Meeting in New Jersey. This is her first issue as PCN editor. Welcome, Carol.

We are immensely grateful to have had the services of John Meyer as our interim editor. John held the publication together while the Working Group conducted an editor search. Our warm thanks to go John and to Lynne Phillips and the team of writers for High School and Young Adult Friends for their patience as we found our way.

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.

*Jan Hoffman currently serves as clerk of the "Faith and Practice" Revision Committee of New England Yearly Meeting. She is a frequent speaker and workshop leader in a wide range of Friendly settings.*

### Questions for Reflection:

1. *What concrete steps might we take so that the clearness process in our meeting could be strengthened?*
2. *What resources do we provide for clearness committees and for couples? 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?*

## RESOURCES

### Readings on Marriage

Hoffman, Jan, *Growing in Faith: collected writings of Jan Hoffman*: "On Marriage: No Safe Dallying with Truth", March 2000.\*

McBee, Patricia, editor, *Grounded in God, Care and Nurture in Friends Meeting* pp. 73, 82, 92, 98 More resources listed, p. 311-12 Quaker Press, Friends General Conference, Philadelphia, PA, 2002 \* ‡

Watson, Elizabeth G., *Marriage in the light : reflections on commitment and the clearness process*: Family Relations Committee, Phila. Yearly Meeting, 1993. \*

Florence Ruth Kline with Marty Grundy, editors, *Companions along the way : spiritual formation within the Quaker tradition : a resource for adult religious education*, pp.143-152: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 2000. ‡

*Living with oneself and others: working papers on aspects of family life*: New England Yearly Meeting Committee on Ministry and Counsel, 1993. ‡ ~

*A 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, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, Family Relations Committee, 1988. \*

\* PYM Library (215) 241-7220

‡ FGC Bookstore (800) 966-4556

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