

Pastoral Care *Newsletter*

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

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Beyond Tradition: Caring for Marriage in the 21st Century

by Joan and Rich Liversidge

In the presence of God, and before these our friends, take thee....., to be my (wife, husband) promising, with Divine Assistance, to be unto thee a loving and faithful (wife, husband) as long as we both shall live.

Marriage under the care of a meeting is a covenant that involves the couple, the meeting and God. The couple commits to a lifelong partnership in the Spirit. A clearness committee for marriage, on behalf of the meeting, discerns unity with the couple's leading for this covenant. The meeting finds clarity about taking the marriage under its care. If unity is reached, the meeting cares for the partnership and helps the couple live their covenant.

Recent trends in marriage and divorce—many of which have become evident only during the last few decades—have transformed family life in society at large. Our extensive experience as couple enrichment leaders among Friends (and Joan's as a marriage and family therapist) confirms for us that the Quaker community mirrors these broader social trends and issues.

In this period of change, Friends' testimonies and our process for clearness for marriage have remained largely unaltered. The challenge for Quaker meetings today is how to modify our traditional marriage clearness and oversight processes to address these complexities. When led by the Spirit,

our meetings can adapt without losing what is valuable and grounded about cherished Quaker traditions and processes.

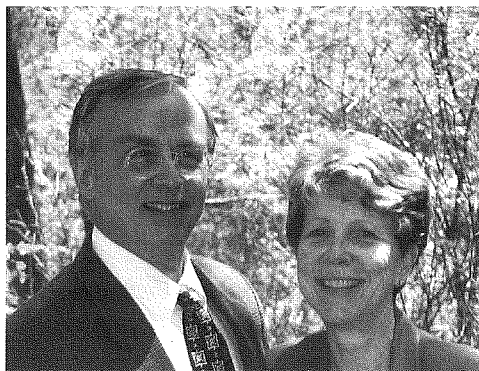
The Cultural Context

Marriage historically addressed property and inheritance rights, and forged important interfamily ties. Through the mid-20th century, marriage continued to carry important cultural and institutional benefits. Families were held together by the forces of law, tradition and religious belief. Gender roles were relatively well defined, and the couple commitment functioned primarily through socially dictated constraints and mores.

Beginning early in the mid-20th century, society was evolving toward more of a companionship model of marriage based on friendship, companionship and romantic love. Since then, marriage has evolved further to become highly individualized, where the partners focus on development of self within a nurturing couple or family relationship. Today, many relationships combine elements of both companionship and individualized marriage.

As marriage partners, our dilemma as individuals involves the trade-off between our deep-seated desire to connect with another person and our individual need for independence. It's easy to have either; it's hard to have both. It is time for Friends honestly and faithfully to examine the practices and supports that are required to fulfill

The first in this series of two articles, Clearness Committees on Marriage or Commitment by Jan Hoffman, appeared in March 2006.



Joan and Richard Liversidge

our commitment to care for marriages.

Societal Trends and Quaker Response

When a meeting takes a marriage under its care, the process begins with the couple and meeting representatives participating in a Clearness Committee. After approval of the marriage at a Meeting for Business, an Oversight Committee oversees the wedding ceremony.

One of the recent demographic changes in this country has been geographic mobility, including that of meeting members and attenders. We believe that monthly meetings, perhaps with the assistance of yearly meetings and the community at large, are called to provide care for marriages in ways that reflect societal changes.

In this article, we describe some of the prevalent trends that impact Friends today and offer several recommendations both for clearness committees and for meetings.

• Divorce

Trends in divorce during the past century are sobering. In 1900, divorces occurred in about ten percent of all marriages. Today, forty-eight percent of American marriages are expected to end in divorce within their first twenty years.

Marital distress may lead to divorce, and whether a couple divorces or stays together, adults and children are at increased risk for mental and physical problems sooner or later in their lives.

Research on married couples has proliferated during the past several decades and a substantial body of information now exists about what predicts marital satisfaction, marital distress and divorce. These

Risk Factors Affecting Marriage in the 21st Century

Static Risk Factors

(hard to change once you are married)

- Tendency to react strongly or defensively to problems and disappointments
- Having divorced parents
- Living together prior to marriage
- Being previously divorced (you and/or your partner)
- Having children from a previous marriage
- Having different religious backgrounds
- Marrying at a very young age
- Knowing each other for only a short time before marriage
- Experiencing financial hardship

Dynamic Risk Factors

(able to be changed with work)

- Negative styles of talking and fighting with each other, such as negative put downs and/or punitive silence
- Difficulty communicating, especially when you disagree
- Trouble handling disagreements as a team
- Unrealistic beliefs about marriage
- Having different attitudes about important things
- Low level of relationship commitment, including not protecting the relationship from others you are attracted to and not viewing the marriage as a long-term investment.

predictors may be either static or dynamic (see Risk Factors box) and can help the meeting explore the couple's clearness for marriage.

Research shows that when couples learn relationship skills, they are better able to maintain positive, loving relationships. Meetings can encourage couples to attend skill-based education and enrichment programs provided by Quakers during the premarital phase of a relationship, in the early years of marriage, and/or during significant life transitions (e.g. birth of first child, empty nest, job and/or career change, loss and grief).

Marriages are especially vulnerable during their early years, when differences first become apparent and bonds of intimacy are tested. Of first marriages ending in divorce, many end in the first three to five years.

Skill-based premarital preparation programs that include a relationship assessment inventory have been shown to be very effective in reducing these numbers. The most effective programs also teach conflict management strategies and skills for maintaining positive connections.

Therefore, we recommend that monthly meetings consider developing a marriage mentoring program starting at the premarital stage and continuing through the first year of marriage.

• Blended Families

We live in a society that believes in marriage—often doing it again and again. Most of us remarry after a divorce. In many cases there are children present in the family, and this adds to the complexity of blending the members of the new family. The failure rate of second and subsequent marriages is

higher than for first marriages (60 percent vs. 48 percent). Research on stepfamily dissolution indicates that this high rate of failure is often due to two things: the presence of children from previous relationships and conflicts over money.

A myth embraced by many is that a previous marriage failure was due to a “faulty choice of partners” and the new marriage will be successful because it involves a new, better partner. The reality is that stepfamily life is very challenging. Couples forming stepfamilies often are pulled in many directions, and the couple relationship can become fragmented and intensely stressed.

Clearness committees need to be willing to inquire how a blending couple is handling the discipline of children, parental visitation, finances, and extended family relationships. Adult religious education programs might offer information and relationship skills to address some of these questions and help resolve conflicts and differences.

If a meeting does not have the resources to support a program for stepfamilies, a program may be located in the community or through the Stepfamily Association of America.

• Cohabitation

In our society today, half of all young adults live with a partner before marrying. Most cohabiting relationships do not last long—about half of them end within a year. Learning relationship skills may assist in the resolution of issues and help the couple decide whether they are clear to marry. A better understanding of Quaker marriage traditions may also be helpful. This would be an excellent program for Young Adult Friends to sponsor.

Thirty-nine percent of people cohabiting in 1995 had children from a previous relationship living with them. When children are involved, even when they are grown, clearness committees need to explore the responsibility that each partner feels to the children in the relationship and the children’s views of how marriage is expected to change the family. Including children in the clearness process helps the meeting community discern children’s expectations and wishes for this newly forming family, and creates communication bridges to the children who will be so dramatically affected by this new family entity. The clearness committee should inquire about the other parent and his or her view of this new relationship.

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Couples Enrichment: A Resource for Couples and Meetings

A pervasive myth in our culture is that if you love one another, you’ll automatically know how to create a relationship that is nurturing and resilient. Research has shown, however, that education in relationship skills early in a committed relationship can help a couple weather the inevitable challenges of a lifetime together. Meetings can support couples married under their care by providing them with an opportunity to participate in a couples enrichment event.

Friends have had a pioneering “Couple Enrichment” program since 1969. The simple, Quakerly process brings together a small group of 6-8 couples under the guidance of a trained leader couple. Together they practice communication skills while reflecting on the strengths and values of their relationships. The couples gain a sense of being part of a community of couples where they learn from one another about how to invent and reinvent a relationship that works.

My husband Brad Sheeks and I, as well as Joan and Richard Liversidge, writers of the lead article in this issue of PCN, serve as leader couples for couple enrichment.

Couple Enrichment certainly has helped us over bumpy spots in our relationship, and it has drawn us deeper into our spiritual lives. It is a privilege to be with couples and watch the love flow between them and an even greater privilege to see a couple again, years later, and hear that the skills they gained have served them well over the years.

The typical couple enrichment group meets for a weekend or for a series of weekday evenings totaling 15-18 hours. Leader couples are available to lead a retreat within a meeting for newlyweds and relationships of longer standing. To find a leader couple, or to find out about groups that may be scheduled in your area, contact Deborah Fisch at Friends General Conference. (deborahf@fgcquaker.org or 800-257-9492) Couple Enrichment opportunities are also available at the FGC Gathering, and periodically at Pendle Hill, Powel House, and other Quaker conference centers. Training also can be obtained from the Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment (ACME).

Patricia McBee
Central Philadelphia Meeting

In the last thirty years, the number of births to unmarried women has more than tripled (from 11 percent of all births in 1975 to 35 percent of all births in 2005). Cohabiting couples represent 40 percent of those births.

Non-marital, childbearing families are considered "fragile families" in which emotional and resource stability are reduced for both the couple and the children. In such families, the partners rarely marry.

If the meeting has unmarried, cohabiting couples with children, it is helpful to encourage participation in an education/enrichment program that will strengthen their current relationship, give them a forum to decide whether they are led to marry, and learn ways to effectively co-parent their children. Sometimes other resources and social supports will need to be identified to help protect the welfare of the children and the adults.

• **Marriage in Later Life**

Medical technology and preventative health practices have increased the longevity of many Americans. The number of newly single older persons has been increasing due to the prevalence of divorce after many years of marriage or the loss of a spouse through death. It is increasingly likely that older people will be led to form new commitments. Some will choose marriage, while others may choose a ceremony of commitment due to financial or legal considerations.

Clearness committees need to explore several areas with these couples: the basis for civil or religious marriage vs a ceremony of commitment; the views of each partner's children about the new relationship; issues related to wills and estate planning (to ensure that the children and other heirs are treated respectfully and fairly); where they will live and how they will manage household finance; estate planning and how best to combine two households into one. Clearness committees need to be sensitive to whether emotional recovery is complete from grieving the loss of a loved one either through divorce or death.

• **Same-gender Marriage**

Friends have labored over how best to support gay and lesbian Friends as they develop meaningful rituals to support their relationships, especially through marriage and ceremonies of commitment. Some monthly

meetings, discerning God's presence in these relationships, have been led to offer marriage under the meeting's care or ceremonies of commitment as an alternative to marriage.

Still others are unresolved on the matter. And some are unable to move forward at all for various reasons. In this area, change has been slow and difficult and has tested our ability to be truly faithful to the leading of the Spirit, the discernment of God's will, and the nurture of our membership. (On this issue, see Pastoral Care Newsletter for January 2000, "Seeking Clearness On Same Gender Marriage" by Karen Stewart.)

Baltimore Yearly Meeting, like some other Yearly Meetings, has not reached unity on this practice. However, most BYM monthly meetings have reached unity within their own memberships and are acting on those leadings.

In the clearness process for same gender couples, it is helpful to explore the extent to which a public formalization of the relationship has the support of their families, including the children. Also, since few states provide automatic legal recognition and protection, clearness committees need to explore what arrangements the couple is making for issues such as inheritance, home ownership, children, medical powers of attorney, and other legal and financial matters.

There is a rich opportunity here for the meeting community to provide much-needed spiritual and familial support since support from society at large frequently is not available.

Same gender couples have similar experiences and needs as other couples. The support they receive from their spiritual community and from couple enrichment programs is welcomed.

• **Couples Married Elsewhere**

Many meetings attract adult seekers who have been married elsewhere or who marry without the formal care of the meeting. The two of us are a case in point. Twenty-five years ago, we were attenders at a meeting but did not feel connected enough to seek marriage under the meeting's care. So we chose to be married elsewhere "in the manner of Friends."

Since then, we have experienced enormous (but informal) support and caring of our marriage by our meeting community and through our involvement in Friends General Conference's (FGC) Couple Enrichment Program. However, recently we requested that

our own marriage be taken under the care of our meeting formally, as we renew our marriage commitment.

As we write this, we have begun a clearness process with the meeting's committee for marriage and the larger meeting community. The committee welcomed our request, partly as an opportunity to educate others about the value and responsibilities of marriages under a meeting's care.

Another way to formally take a marriage under the care of meeting is to include this in the membership approval or transfer process. We encourage meetings to consider including these additional practices as part of their pastoral care to couples in the meeting community.

Adapting Quaker Process

• Education

We recommend that meetings include Quaker marriage as a component in religious education programs for young Friends, young adult Friends and adult Friends. The meeting community can provide short informational and worship sharing events for singles, couples, young Friends and committee members.

These programs can discuss what "marriage under the care" means. Particular care is needed in exploring with Friends, from other faith traditions, ways in which our traditions apply to them, as they may have had spiritual hurts that are still painful.

Members of marriage clearness committees need to know how societal and cultural trends affect couples, the importance of relationship skills in preventing marital distress and divorce, and how Quaker faith and practice can be applied to support and nurture marriage. This education should be ongoing as members roll off of committees and institutional memories fade without updates. Couples trained and/or certified as leader couples with FGC's Couple Enrichment Program can be resources in developing this educational material.

• Enrichment

The FGC Couple Enrichment Program (FGC-CEP) includes experienced Quaker couples trained to lead enrichment events. (See sidebar on page 3.) Monthly and yearly meetings can seek out spiritually gifted couples open to sharing their marriages to ben-

efit other couples in their communities and support them in being trained as couple enrichment leaders. Support can be in the form of writing letters, arranging funds for training and travel costs, and perhaps finding ways to provide child care.

• Mentoring Premarital Couples and Newlyweds

After twenty years as couple enrichment leaders through FGC-CEP, our own leading has grown to encompass marriage mentoring. Recently, we were trained to recruit, train and supervise groups of mentor leader couples. Marriage mentoring connects a skilled, experienced couple with a newly committed couple. It is our belief that marriage mentoring will enhance our traditional Quaker practices and both complement and supplement the clearness and oversight processes.

The Quaker version of marriage mentoring, as we envision it, would be skill-based and would include the use of a relationship assessment inventory. The mentor couple administers the relationship inventory, provides feedback to the couple on relationship strengths and areas of growth, and teaches relationship skills.

The formal mentoring relationship typically would continue through the first year after the wedding, but it may continue well beyond that in a less formal arrangement.

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Questions for Reflection

- 1) Do members and attenders know what marriage under the care of the meeting means for the couple? For the meeting?
- 2) What does your meeting do to actively care for marriages? To help couples live their covenant?
- 3) Does your meeting encourage couples to participate in premarital programs, couple or marriage enrichment, or professional counseling when needed?
- 4) Is financial assistance available for couples who wish to participate in these programs? How is it made known to those who might need it?
- 5) What do you need to do to improve how you care for couples and marriages in your meeting?

Creative Use of Conflict: A Source of Relationship Strength

David and Vera Mace, who developed the Quaker model of couple enrichment, asserted that conflict in marriage is inevitable and can be used productively. Used effectively, conflict helps the couple to identify and negotiate their relationship differences and maintain equality, connection and love. This fosters intimacy in the relationship.

Committee members might ask some of the following questions: How do you handle conflict? How comfortable are you with these expressions of difference? Is there any physical or verbal abuse during conflict? What was your experience with conflict in your family of origin? In prior close relationships? How do you view anger—as a natural, biological re-

sponse to something important within us, or as a negative emotion that is not welcome and should be suppressed?

The view that anger and conflict can be healthy in our relationships is difficult for some Quakers to accept. Quakers often are taught—wrongly, in our view—to see conflict and anger as “bad.” Our differences lead, inevitably, to some level of conflict. One psychologist describes marriage as a crucible in which the heat generated by this conflict cooks off our impurities and purifies the relationship. To us, this process of purification produces relationship strength, security and resiliency as we grow toward the ideal relationship God intended for us.

When conflict is destructive, it affects both couples and children. Friends often are reluctant to engage with the couple from a fear of being viewed as intrusive.

We recommend that meetings identify members with spiritual depth and interpersonal skills to help couples tenderly and without judgment to find assistance. This may take the form of reconvening the oversight committee, referral to a marriage education program, or professional counseling.

Resources: Useful Readings and Sites

- Cherllin, Andre J. *American Marriage in the Early Twenty-First Century*, “Marriage and Child Wellbeing, The Future of Children,” Policy Brief, Fall, 2005.
- Mace, David, R. *Close Companions: The Marriage Enrichment Handbook*, Continuum, N.Y. 1984.
- Stanley, Scott M. and Markman, Howard J. *Facts about Marital Distress and Divorce*, (see PREP below.) May, 2005
- McBee, Patricia, editor, *Grounded in God: Care and Nurture in Friends Meeting*, pp 71 – 105, Quaker Press, Friends General Conference, 2002.
- Living with Oneself and Others*, New England Yearly Meeting, 901 Pleasant Street, Worcester, MA 01602.
- Stanley, Scott M. *The Power of Commitment: A Guide to Active, Lifelong Love*, Jossey-Bass, 2005.

Web Sites

- www.fgcquaker.org Friends General Conference, Couple Enrichment Program (FGC-CEP)
- www.bettermarriages.org Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment (ACME)
- www.nire.org National Institute of Relationship Enhancement (NIRE)
- www.prepinc.org Preparation and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP)

Summary and Conclusions

Marriage has been a precious testimony among Friends for 350 years. And yet, as the world has changed, so have the institutions of marriage and family. We need to look at ourselves honestly and compassionately to identify areas where cultural influences and trends have affected individuals and families in our midst. And then, with Divine guidance coupled with our own prayer, worship and discernment, we will be able to adapt our traditional practices and adopt new approaches without losing the foundation of our Quaker traditions.

Joan and Richard Liversidge are members of Sandy Spring Monthly Meeting, Baltimore Yearly Meeting. They are a certified leader couple with FGC-CEP and ACME. Joan is a certified program leader for Relationship Enhancement® and a practicing Marriage and Family Therapist.

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