

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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A Well-arranged Wedding: Modern Complexity Challenges Quaker Simplicity

by Nancy Taylor

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

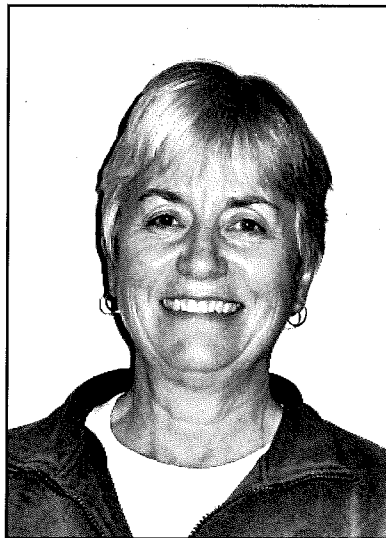
Quaker marriage vows from North Pacific Yearly Meeting, *Faith & Practice*.

The beautiful vow that Friends have used to seal their promises to one another was created in a simpler time, when most Quaker weddings would have involved two birthright or convinced Friends. In today's world, things are not so simple. Partners might meet anywhere in the world as people travel more; a resulting pair is likely to be from two different cultures or different religious backgrounds. New seekers drawn to the Religious Society of Friends reflect a growing diversity of belief and tradition. The marriage age is more likely to be in the 30s or 40s than in the late teens and twenties, so each person may have already established a home and a firm circle of friends.

These factors and more have made the once-simple task of planning a wedding after the manner of Friends far more challenging than ever before; and yet the timeless qualities of the Quaker process

remain as they were for George Fox and Margaret Fell. Friends gather at an appointed time to witness and uphold a union of two people "in the presence of God," and with the couple they celebrate this new beginning.

Our large meeting in a university town has been the chosen venue for many weddings since the meeting's founding in the 1930s. Due to the frequency of requests, our Ministry and Counsel Committee produced a booklet in 1982: *Marriage in Ann Arbor Friends Meeting: A Guide for those inquiring and for Meeting Participation*, now going into a second revision and reprinting. This article gives me an opportunity to share some of our practices and experiences that might be helpful to pastoral caregivers and to those responsible for wedding arrangements.



Nancy Taylor

Arrangements Committee

I urge careful consideration of the committee's makeup, even though the couple may have numerous close friends who have offered to help. Two or three Friends who are well grounded in Quaker practice can bring clarity to the most flustered couple. Loving, open listening and gentle guidance will help the process go smoothly and will be reassuring. Once the marriage under the meeting's care has been approved, the convener

of the clearness committee consults with the couple, and then suggests names for arrangements committee appointments. Remember, it is important that committee members can attend the wedding and are available before, during and after the ceremony. They will surely need diplomatic skills if the families of the couple are not knowledgeable about Friends' belief and practices.

Laying Out the Tasks

A wedding combines two families in a life-long relationship and may be laying the cornerstone of a future generation. It's not surprising, then, that the actual event generates numerous details. In the arrangements committee's first meeting, begin by enumerating all the tasks that require attention and individual assignment for each one, with deadlines specified. Appointing a note-taker can avoid distress later. We probably all know of a situation where someone is frantically saying, "I thought YOU were going to order the flowers...."

Will the couple need assistance with preparation and distribution of the invitations? The committee may be called on to help find accommodations for out-of-town guests.

The convener can play the role of shepherd, urging people to complete their tasks in a timely manner.

The Wedding Date

Has a wedding date been chosen which suits both families and the meeting? Does it avoid conflicts with the meeting calendar and take into account major holidays that might make travel difficult? Does the time of day take parking and traffic into account? Attendance is usually open to the entire meeting, so advance publication of the date in the newsletter or on a bulletin board is appropriate.

Place

Whether the chosen site is the meetinghouse or some other venue, has it been booked? Remember to include time for set-up and clean up, as well as

an hour or more for the ceremony plus plenty of time for reunions of friends and family. This is a time when families have a rare opportunity to come together from distant places, so you will want to reserve the space for several hours, allowing extra time for a reception if necessary. If you have an alcohol policy for the meetinghouse, make that known.

The wedding party may need quiet rooms for dressing and resting, in addition to the meeting room for the ceremony. Does a room need to be reserved for a reception? Are there kitchen facilities for preparation of food and for clean up? Out-of-town guests may need a place to rest or have a drink of water. Are there an adequate number of restrooms and wheelchair accessible facilities? Enough nearby parking to accommodate the crowd?

A couple in our meeting found their guests list growing far beyond the capacity of the meeting room, so they decided to hold the wedding at another site, and the questions above were especially relevant. Maintaining the simplicity and quiet dignity of a Quaker wedding in a non-Quaker setting may require particular care.

Legal Requirements

Laws regarding the legality of Quaker marriages vary from state to state. Check with the nearest county clerk to find out what is required to obtain a marriage license and how to file it later. A few states recognize marriages between people of the same sex; most do not. A meeting will want to be sensitive to the challenges a same-sex couple faces and help to arrange a celebration of commitment if a legal marriage isn't possible. (See *PCN*, January 2000 Vol. 7, No. 2; March 2006 Vol. 13, No. 3, also Resources p 6 in this issue.)

Even today, some states may not officially recognize Quaker marriages. (Pennsylvania is unique in providing a separate license.) In some cases, Friends have worked out agreements, but even those may not be written into state law. Friends should not rely on Internet sources, since they are often flawed. Yearly Meetings will provide the best information.

In my state of Michigan the statute notes: "The provisions of this chapter ... shall not affect marriages among the people called Friends or Quakers ... but such marriages may be solemnized in the manner heretofore used and practiced in their (society)." The county clerk signs the license, adding "This is a Friends' marriage, solemnized in accordance with Section _____, Compiled Laws 1948." Your meeting should always have this information on hand, in printed form.

In any case, the couple will need to obtain the license in advance. The meeting clerk (or an appointed person) and a witness will sign the license immediately following the ceremony, asserting that it did take place. Then the responsible person will deliver one copy of the document to the appropriate government office, and another copy to the couple.

Vows

The vows should be an early and important focus for discussion between the couple and the committee. Since the vows are usually memorized and will appear on the certificate, an early agreement on the specific wording is essential. Some couples wish to write their own vows, which is acceptable as long as they reflect and maintain the spirit of those published in *Faith and Practice* of most yearly meetings.

Many years ago, our meeting took a marriage under its care for a couple wishing to write their own vows. The arrangements committee did not review the final version. Their surprise was evident when, in the ceremony, the couple said they promised to be loving and faithful as long as they remained interested in one another.

Whether the vows are said haltingly, loudly or softly, forcefully, or with tears, they will carry the sweet message of a spiritual promise both to the partner and the assembled witnesses. The couple normally waits until the worship has deepened—perhaps 10 minutes—before rising and taking one another by the hand to say the solemn words to one another. Some couples wish to exchange rings and

kisses after the vows, some do not.

Certificate

The Certificate of Marriage records the vows and includes the signatures of everyone present. This is an important and meaningful part of the day. The committee can help with design and wording, but the couple must make the arrangements to have it produced well in advance for delivery before the big day. (Friends General Conference bookstore in Philadelphia, PA, sells a printed version with appropriate blanks.) Most couples prefer to engage a professional calligrapher, as is a custom among Friends. Such artists are often Friends or may be well known within monthly, quarterly, or yearly meetings.

The certificate will be signed by the couple immediately after they say their vows, and then will be read aloud so that all who choose to sign will understand what they are witnessing. The reader may be a family member or friend, or someone chosen from the meeting. While it is not a legal document, it often is framed and hung on the wall of the new home as a declaration of the love embodied in the household.

True beauty of spirit comes from within; expensive clothing or fancy decorations are not needed to make the occasion a memorable one.

Simplicity

The committee will discuss the Quaker value of simplicity with the couple, as this will affect the manner of dress and decoration of the meetinghouse, and other practices. True beauty of spirit comes from within; expensive clothing or fancy decorations are not needed to make the occasion a memorable one. This may not be apparent to the families of the couple, who might expect organ music and tuxedos, so committee members may reassure them.

Many Friends' weddings have occurred out-of-doors during the pleasant summer months. The number in the wedding party need not be large, but should be decided according to the couple's wishes. The committee might suggest that friends of the couple or meeting members provide food for the reception rather than hire professional caterers.

Rehearsal

A wedding rehearsal is essential. Checking on entrances and exits, the order of events, who will perform each task, and practicing the vows will help calm any pre-ceremony jitters. It's wise to do this the day before the wedding. Allow plenty of time for people to ask questions and express opinions.

Guest Information

Many guests may be entering a Friends meetinghouse for the first time and will be unfamiliar with Quaker practices. Providing some explanation about the manner and the meaning behind the ceremony, both in written and spoken form, is helpful. A small sheet or leaflet for arriving guests can clarify the reasons for silence and the absence of a priest or other officiant. It can also encourage verbal sharing of inspiration, encouragement and love for the couple.

The beautiful and simple ceremony allows the Spirit to bubble up in anyone present. A well-known Friend first experienced Quaker worship

at the wedding of my husband's sister. He was so impressed and moved that he not only joined the Society of Friends, but also dedicated a major portion of his working life to Quaker organizations. It's not unusual for a seed to be planted at a wedding.

The Wedding

The ceremony is a Meeting for Worship. This does not prohibit the inclusion of music before and/or after the service, but it does strongly suggest that photography and recording of the event should be accomplished well before or after the wedding. The meeting should have its video/camera policy readily available in print.

Some essentials:

- a small, sturdy portable table to hold the certificate while the couple signs it;
- a smooth-writing pen (or two) with permanent black ink;
- weights to flatten the certificate for easy signing;
- a blotter to protect the certificate while it is being signed and a card to place under the signer's hand;
- a table in an outer room where all the assemblage can sign the certificate

The couple will want to choose:

- two or more greeters to welcome people at the door;
- someone (often the clerk of the meeting or one of the ministry and counsel committee) to stand as the gathering settles, welcome everyone to the wedding, and explain the order of events, and how the ceremony will be concluded;
- two people to carry the table to the couple after they say their vows;
- someone to read the certificate aloud immediately after the couple has signed it;
- someone to oversee the general signing of the certificate;
- someone to check on opening the building and room, ventilation, lighting, bench moving, receiving and placing flowers, clean up, and closing;
- someone to supervise childcare if children are being included.

Questions for Reflection

1. How are pastoral caregivers providing spiritual guidance for couples and for the arrangements committee?
2. How have the arrangement committee members met the challenge of honoring simplicity in a complex world?
3. How has the meeting assured that its wedding information is concise, current and accessible?
4. How are the meeting's policies on simplicity, alcohol, cameras and videos, music and the like articulated?
5. How are non-Friend couples and families helped to learn about and understand Friends' traditions and practices well before the wedding date?

It's likely that the wedding will last about one hour, though it may run longer if the vocal ministry is rich and it's clear that many are moved to speak. The same person who introduced the worship will choose the appropriate time to end it by shaking hands with a seatmate, and all are encouraged to greet others around them. The same person may ask guests to allow the couple and family members to leave the meeting room first.

Recording the Event

At the monthly Meeting for Business following the wedding, the arrangements committee should report that the wedding took place on a given date, and what name the bride has taken. This is entered in the minutes and a copy of the license should be made for the meeting's marriage book or some other designated location or archive.

The meeting's responsibility to the couple does not end with the wedding ceremony. Rather, if the spirit of "under the care of the meeting" is to

be fulfilled, it begins there. The meeting's pastoral caregivers and relevant committees should be aware of challenges the couple may face. Starting a new life, establishing a new home and new family, especially in uncertain economic times, present challenges enough for anyone.

Most of all, the couple should be held in the Light and lovingly encouraged to become full members of the meeting community.

"Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing one with another ... praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand."

— Isaac Penington, 1667

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A member of Ann Arbor (MI) Friends Meeting, Nancy Emmons Taylor married Thomas Fuller Taylor in a Quaker wedding at Florida Avenue Meeting in Washington, DC forty-five years ago. She attended Quaker schools (Olney, Earlham) and has participated in eight meeting communities.

Be Ready for Surprises: 'The Best-laid Plans ...'

Quakerism has sometimes been defined as a process of continuing revelation and Quaker weddings are no exception. You never know what might happen.

Testimony and verbal ministry in worship, including the meeting for worship for marriage, is at the heart of Quaker belief and tradition. Wedding guests are encouraged to share their hopes for the couple, their prayers and their joy about the union once the vows have been exchanged. Those messages become as treasured a part of the family's memories as witnesses' signatures on the wedding certificate.

But not always.

At one wedding, the clerk was so vigorous in his direction to speak *only* if guests were authentically moved by the Spirit, that no one spoke at all! People were so intimidated by the clerk's admonition, that the service seemed more like a funeral than a wedding.

How sad for the bride and groom.

And the opposite might happen. Years have not dimmed the memories of another couple whose guests were stunned by a verbal message.

The bride had come to this country as a young English girl during World War II and had been placed under the care of a guardian. The young woman had grown up, attended college in the Midwest and there met her future husband. When they made plans to be married under the care of a meeting, the woman's former guardian apparently assumed a parental role. The guardian's emotional distress became apparent when she stood during meeting and ranted about the unsuitability of the match, claiming that the groom was "stealing" the bride from her.

Several times, the convener of the arrangements committee stood and tried to persuade her to sit down, but she carried on. Finally after his third try, he rose and said that the wedding would have to be postponed and the meeting for worship was ended. The wedding party went to a back room to figure out what to do, while someone took the guardian to a quiet place where they could talk.

The guests, in some confusion, stayed to see if the problem could be resolved, and, sure enough, it was—eventually—with patience and "gentle persuasion." The former guardian finally agreed that

the wedding could go ahead and she would remain silent. She sat in the back row with a seasoned Friend and did not rise to speak again.

The wedding proceeded in quiet dignity and achieved a great depth of Spirit; everyone there upheld the couple in love. Faithful messages that the match had been blessed by God were abundant. Now, more than 50 years later, the marriage that began with a stressful outburst is still strong and sustaining.

Another young couple used a meetinghouse for their wedding, performed by a Protestant pastor. The bride, a Friend and a lifetime member of that meeting, was marrying a Jewish man she had met in college.

The meetinghouse was full, the service moving and very appropriate. As they were pronounced husband and wife, the building erupted! Applause and sounds of "Shalom!" rattled the rafters. Many Friends were shocked at such a loud expression of joy. We do not usually hear applause and cheering in our meetinghouses.

On reflection however, shouting "Peace!" in a Quaker meetinghouse following the union of an inter-faith couple might be just as affirming and appropriate as our more subdued vocal ministry.

Weddings touch our deepest emotions, stir memories, reawaken cherished traditions and sometimes reveal hidden feelings. You never know what might happen, but with sensitivity on the part of pastoral caregivers and the arrangements committee, and reliance on acknowledging "that of God" in everyone, Friends can experience a happy ending—and beginning.

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**In PCN June 2009:
Meeting Support of Marriage
by Patricia McBee
Time to renew your subscription!**

Resources

Faith & Practice: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends. (Other YMs may have other versions.)

A Wedding Packet, a compilation of resources, available from the Quaker Information Center. Call 215-241-7024 or e-mail director@quakerinfo.org.

Same Sex Marriages: <http://home.att.net/~snowolff/quaker/quaker.htm> and <http://home.att.net/~snowolff/gay/gay.htm>

Historical perspective from the U.K.: <http://www.law.cf.ac.uk/clr/networks/Marriage%20Q.pdf>

From Quaker Books: <http://www.quakerbooks.org/marriage> (more on web site):

Friends and Weddings: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, Quaker Press 1987

Quaker Marriage: Edward Milligan, Quaker Press 1994.

Grounded in God: Care and Nurture in Friends Meetings, marriage-related articles: pp 73, 82, 92, 98, Quaker Press, FGC 2002

Marriage: A Spiritual Leading For Lesbian, Gay And Straight Couples, Leslie Hill, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 1995

Marriage and Commitment, Southeastern Yearly Meeting, Excerpted from SEYM *Faith and Practice*. 2006

Committed Relationships, New Edition, Committee on Eldership and Oversight, Britain Yearly Meeting 2007

The Philadelphia Yearly Meeting library will send a list of wedding- and marriage-related resources; e-mail requests: ritav@pym.org

Marriage laws by state: http://www.usmarriagelaws.com/search/united_states/index.shtml (General information.)

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