

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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Meeting Support of Marriage and Couple Relationships

by Patricia Mc Bee

Support of the couple at the center of the family unit is an important opportunity for ministry in our meetings. David Mace, a Friend and founder of the marriage enrichment movement that has spread around the world, believed that stable marriages lead to stable families that lead to stable communities that lead, by and by, to world peace. Care of marriage is a cornerstone of our contributing to the well being of the society around us.

Yet, even after 40 years of the couple enrichment program among Friends, on the whole, there is a great reticence among Friends to engage with each other to deal with the nitty-gritty issues of what makes relationships work. Most often our pastoral care committees feel helpless and out of place in trying to reach out to couples, particularly if the couple is known or believed to be in a stressful period in their relationship—exactly when we are needed most.

It is not surprising that we are hesitant. In our culture little is regarded as more shameful than having people know that our relationship is struggling. We tend to keep the details of our relationships very private, thus depriving one another of the knowledge that all of us have

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rough times and that rough times are survivable.

Talking frankly about the day-to-day workings of relationships can help couples see others' relationships not as picture perfect, but as resilient and creative in the face of the inevitable challenges of learning to love each other well. We learn so much more from hearing other couples, see options that hadn't occurred to us before, and find out that we are not alone in the things that are difficult. Occasions of discussing marriage in the ordinary times create a foundation for greater willingness to have our needs known and to accept support in hard times.

Caring for couples in the good times

There are many things that meetings can do to support couples day in and day out that will not strain the resources of the pastoral care committee.

1. Create an atmosphere in which relationships can be talked about. The key in supporting



Patricia McBee

couples is to integrate that support into the life of the meeting. If you wait until a couple is in trouble and then want to help them, you may lack the connections that make it possible for your help to be accepted. If you support relationships while they are still strong, fewer problems may arise and you will be in a better position to respond when a problem does arise.

2. Create occasions for couples to get together to discuss relationships.

- Organize ongoing couples' support groups that meet monthly. These groups can include a mix of couples or be established topically such as for retired couples, couples with children, couples facing unemployment, couples where only one

is a Quaker, etc.

- Have periodic occasions when groups of couples get together to discuss topics related to relationships such as: how do you integrate different family holiday customs, or how do couples make time for each other in the face of busy schedules?
- One or more times a year, sponsor a discussion of a book or pamphlet on strengthening relationships.
- Set up occasions to meet with couples who have been married under the care of the meeting and elicit suggestions as to how the meeting can be of continuing support.
- Establish a mentoring program in which

Couple Enrichment Program for Friends

Friends have been blessed since 1969 with a simple, peer-led program of encouragement and mutual support for couples. Hundreds of couples—young and old, straight and gay, newly married, long-time married, and not yet married—have found encouragement, support, and guidance for building enduring, resilient relationships.

The power of the retreat for couples is that they can give time to focusing on their relationship without distraction. It is easy to get busy with the rest of life and take our relationships and our partners for granted. A retreat gives us an opportunity to remind ourselves how rich a resource our relationship can be if it is nurtured.

Some meetings sponsor an annual or periodic couples retreat. Others encourage members to attend a couple enrichment program at a Quaker retreat center or Friends General Conference.* Some meetings have an ongoing self-led couples group, but require that participants first take part in a couple enrichment event led by a trained leader couple. Couple enrichment within a meeting has the result, not only of strengthening

relationships, but also of deepening spiritual bonds throughout the meeting.

The leader couples are lay people (farmers, dentists, writers, homemakers) who are committed to growth in their own relationships and who have participated in a training and support program sponsored by FGC. Leader couples are available in most North American yearly meetings and would be delighted to help organize a retreat in your meeting or for several meetings in your area.

A typical retreat takes place over a weekend. It can be a residential retreat at a center or vacation home or a commuter retreat where participants spend the day in the meetinghouse. Some meetings choose to have a series of eight evenings instead of a weekend.

Contact FGC Couple Enrichment, www.fgcquaker.org/couple-enrichment, or call Eric Evans at 215-561-1700.

* Quaker Couple Enrichment is regularly offered at the annual FGC Gathering, at Powell House, Quaker Center, Pendle Hill and other locations.

experienced couples from the marriage clearness or arrangement committee meets with a newly married couple three or four times a year for the first year or two of marriage.

- Sponsor a couples' retreat or support couples in attending one offered by your yearly meeting or Friends General Conference (FGC). When offered on a regular basis, couples retreats can keep support of couples alive in the meeting. And couples can be brought to regard this kind of intentional nurturing of their relationship as important to themselves, the meeting and the world around them (*see sidebar previous page*).

3. Reach out to couples in good times and bad. The societal taboo against revealing your relationship is so strong, that the meeting has to work at ways to make it easy and safe. Don't wait for couples to overcome their hesitations on their own.

Call them specifically to invite them to one of the gatherings listed above and make it clear that it is an opportunity to honor marriage and committed relationships as a spiritual path. Tell them that their participation will be a support to other couples. When the grapevine tells you times are rough for a certain couple, don't wait for them to contact Friends. Have someone they know and trust offer a listening ear and the meeting's support.

4. Establish channels for seeking and giving help. Make sure everyone in the meeting knows where to turn for confidential help.

- Some meetings establish a contact person for each member when they want to tap the meeting's support systems. In my meeting it is your "Friendly contact." In other meetings, households are paired in a buddy system. When something comes up, you talk to your Friendly contact or buddy and explore whether other meeting help should be sought.
- In some meetings there is a standing committee for marriage clearness and

support and it is made known how to contact that committee.

- Meetings can designate an individual, sometimes the clerk of the pastoral care committee, who is known for being able to keep things in confidence. This person can then help the couple identify what support they need.
- In some meetings marriage clearness committees remain in contact with couples in the years after the marriage ceremony and are available for consultation.

5. Use informal as well as formal channels. Often there are individuals in the meeting who can be supportive to a couple in need without "the meeting" having to get officially involved.

Many years ago when my husband, Brad, and I were going through a very painful time, three or four couples of our friends in the meeting buoyed us up with their willingness to listen and love. I don't know if our needs were ever on the agenda of the pastoral care committee, we were never formally contacted. But we got the support we needed.

Sometimes, of course, it is important to use formal channels. I have seen cases in which members didn't recognize informal support as outreach from the meeting and felt as though "the meeting" had not responded to them even though many meeting members had. This leads to the next idea.

6. Tailor your response to the needs of the couple. Put your focus on loving these two people in the best way they can receive. Do you approach them together or individually? With a formal delegation from the caregiving committee or an informal call from a friend? Do you urge them to seek professional help or provide background support while they sort it out on their own? All of these approaches are useful in some cases. Hard and fast practices and procedures won't convey the caring you want to give.

7. Build a reputation for being affirming and not judgmental. If a relationship breaks up, find ways of reaching out in love to both individuals. They are both suffering. They wonder if the

When the grapevine tells you times are rough for a certain couple, don't wait for them to contact Friends.

meeting disapproves or blames or rejects them. When couples hear of practical ways in which another couple was given the meeting's loving care, it will be far less intimidating to accept an offer of help. Knowing the meeting holds its members in love even when they fail can make it easier for couples to let it be known that they are at risk of failing or just aren't quite perfect.

8. Have literature for couples where it can be picked up anonymously. You can make it easier for people to take the first step in seeking help by making it possible to begin without identifying themselves.

Things you might have available on your literature table include:

- Information on how to tap into the meeting's support system
- Pamphlets on relationship issues
- Book lists
- Announcements of retreats and workshops
- Brochures from the yearly meeting listing of Friends counselors or a family counseling service in your area.

Care for couples in times of trouble

When a couple does turn to the meeting for support or when they respond openly to an approach from a meeting committee, it is a vulnerable time that calls on the pastoral care committee to respond with tenderness and caution. The meeting's support is not a substitute for professional relationship counseling, and pastoral caregivers can quickly find themselves in

over their heads. On the other hand, pastoral caregivers can provide the support that allows the couple to take best advantage of professional counseling.

The meeting's caregivers can bring unwavering love, which is God, to people who are troubled. Let them know that they are loved and valued before, during and after a hard time, whatever the outcome. It's amazing how healing and empowering that is.

Here are some specific things the meeting can do for couples who are in a time of trouble:

1. Express the meeting's affection for them and confidence in their ability to find the best solution.
2. Staunchly regard each member of the couple as worthy of love and understanding, no matter who seems "to blame," and help their partner to do the same.
3. Just listen in love.
4. Provide childcare or other concrete support to give the couple opportunities to work on their relationship without distraction.
5. Have a list of professional resources available. It is often hard to choose a professional counselor, so an annotated listing can be a great help.
6. Facilitate the use of a counselor by helping pay the fees or by providing childcare or transportation.

The meeting's key role

Most importantly, we are called to create a loving, caring meeting family. If you want to strengthen relationships and be supportive in times of need: play together, work together, meet informally; talk about yourselves, your hopes, your fears.

Love each other and say so. When the meeting is alive and open, all kinds of support can flow in natural, comfortable ways to couples, singles, old folks and children.

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Patricia McBee has served as pastoral caregiver and as clerk of Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting. She and her husband Brad Sheeks have been leading couples retreats since 1975. For several years they participated in an ongoing couples support group in their meeting.

It's Time to Renew PCN

An easy renewal form is enclosed. Here are some articles we are planning for future issues:

- **Difference/Dissonance/Diversity: How Friends Respond**
- **Quaker Quest: Simple, Radical Contemporary**
- **Help for the Hungry and the Homeless**
- **Spirituality & Aging among Friends**

One Meeting's Experience: Madison (WI) Meeting Offers Monthly Couples' Sessions

The two people sit in the middle of the circle. The couple has already decided what they'll be talking about. One of them takes the lead, in the speaker role, the other starts as listener. Both are held in the Light by the witnesses who also have the luxury of seeing themselves through the lens of that dialoguing couple.

The dialogue topic may be pleasant – an “affirmation dialogue” or about a hot button issue. It's a “working dialogue” in the parlance of Couple Enrichment (CE).

Questions for Reflection

1. How do we create an atmosphere in our meeting in which couples are able to share resources and struggles?
2. What kind of activities can we hold in our meeting to bring couples together to focus on relationship issues?
3. How can we support and sustain one or more couples support groups in the meeting? Can we sponsor an annual couples retreat?
4. What can we do to reach out to couples and help them overcome hesitation to participate in these activities?
5. Can we provide channels for our members to seek confidential help from the meeting? How can we keep members aware of the availability of these resources?
7. How could we as caregivers be more proactive in reaching out with offers of support when we know couples to be struggling?

No matter how it starts, by the end of the 15 or 20 minutes of the very active process of “listening each other into clarity,” it's more likely that the couple is feeling closer, more deeply understanding of one another. It's not about “fixing,” but about seeing the Divine in the eyes of one's beloved.

Here in Madison, Wisconsin, for the last 15 years, there has been at least one of these meetings a month. In 1993, CE leaders Sandy and Pat were asked to conduct a CE workshop here. From that weekend, three couples formed an ongoing support group. Wanting to share the message of good will and support for couples, and wanting company in their dialoguing enterprise, they brought in leaders again the next year, with another 11 couples attending that weekend workshop.

The fourth cycle of workshop has just been completed in Madison. Four ongoing couple support groups now exist, with discussions for a fifth group occurring among the most recent cadre of workshop-experienced couples.

Some of the couples came there through another route: Each year at the FGC gathering, at least one CE workshop is offered. Madison area couples who have been to any CE workshop are encouraged to join an ongoing support group. Some couples have been to two or more workshops.

The ongoing group members soon realized the need for “tune-ups,” a chance to improve or add new skills to their couple communication toolbox. Each year they schedule and put on a retreat for couples. For some years, a leader couple is invited to bring structure and to deal with challenging or new topics, including anger, sex, and spiritual growth.

Other years our own couples lead us. Because retreats take place away from our day-to-day lives, we use local retreat centers to provide the setting. Food is abundant as we are always hungry from the hard-but-good work. Time to dialogue shares the agenda with new information (this year's new

topic was Non-Violent Communication), couple alone time, and art expression. Another valuable hour has been cross-group sharing. With monthly meetings, the ongoing groups develop their own

Resources

American Marriage in the Early Twenty-First Century by Andrew J. Cherlin in *Marriage and Child Wellbeing, The Future of Children*, Policy Brief, Fall, 2005.

Close Companions: The Marriage Enrichment Handbook, David R. Mace, Continuum, N.Y. 1984.

Facts about Marital Distress and Divorce, Scott M. Stanley and Howard J. Markman, Preparation and Relationship Enhancement Program, May, 2005.

Grounded in God: Care and Nurture in Friends Meeting, pgs. 71 – 105, Edited by Patricia McBee, Quaker Press, Friends General Conference, 2002.

Living with Oneself and Others, New England Yearly Meeting, 901 Pleasant Street, Worcester, MA 01602.

The Power of Commitment: A Guide to Active, Lifelong Love, Scott M. Stanley, 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)

customs, be they Light meals together, structured check-ins, and new twists on the dialogue process. Sharing these expands the possibilities for all.

The Madison Monthly Meeting community supports the groups and funds financial scholarships for the initial workshops. Members married under care of the meeting are encouraged to consider a workshop because of the benefit to the whole meeting as well as to the couple. Members recognize that healthy and thriving couples are the backbone of the meeting community.

—Dave and Pamela Minden

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Dave and Pamela Minden attend Madison Monthly Meeting in Madison, Wisconsin. They attended their first CE workshop in 1995, and have been CE leaders since 1999. Both Madison Monthly Meeting and Northern Yearly Meeting have recognized CE work as their ministry. Contact information for questions about CE: dave.minden@sbcglobal.net, pminden@sbcglobal.net.

Helping Others in Hard Times

Families who have experienced loss of jobs and homes are swelling the ranks of the hungry and the homeless.

How has your meeting responded to this crisis? Has your meeting joined with other faith communities in providing help with housing, food or financial assistance? How does your involvement with other faith groups enrich your meeting life?

We'd love to hear your story. Please email the editor and tell us how you are reaching out. PCN's goal is to let others know what they can do in their own communities. Email: cjsuplee@comcast.net

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