



Yearly Meeting of the  
Religious Society of Friends  
(Quakers) in Britain

## The meaning of Marriage

### Introduction to this draft text

This draft material reflects the current thinking of the **Book of Discipline Revision Committee** on how our new book should sound. It is not final but offered for comment. We hope that Friends will provide feedback to help us shape future drafts.

These drafts aim to describe the principles behind our current practice clearly and concisely. They do not try to include detail. They are drafts of the core content which will eventually be accompanied by supplementary material – this can include handbooks, practical guides, and other things which are helpful but do not need to be approved by Yearly Meeting.

In writing these drafts we have needed to make some decisions about language and style. Friends use many different terms for the Light, the Spirit, God, or whatever you call it. We have chosen to use a small list of terms and usually to stick to one term per topic for clarity. We have aimed to keep sentences short and easy to read. We have considered questions about the formality of the text, whether it sounds friendly and welcoming, and what vocabulary to use. Our goal has been to speak plainly and explain these topics peer to peer, as friends.

It would be useful to receive feedback on:

- How these drafts feel to you as a reader
- Anything which seems especially helpful
- Any parts which are jarring, confusing, or difficult to read
- What you would hope to find in the supplementary material for these topics

We will welcome responses to the four points above, but please don't send detailed drafting/redrafting suggestions on the texts at this stage!

We are also circulating an audio version of both texts, which you can access online through our webpage [Revising Quaker faith & practice | Quakers in Britain](#). This is one of the ways we intend to make the text more accessible. If you listen, we'd also like to know what you think of this audio version.

We welcome responses from individuals or groups of Friends.

If you can, please use our online form to send your responses:

<https://forms.quaker.org.uk/bdrc-comment-on-draft-text/>

Or, if you need to, you can send your responses to:

Michael S Booth (BDRC secretary) at [gfp@quaker.org.uk](mailto:gfp@quaker.org.uk) or by post to:

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Friends House  
Euston Road  
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NW1 2BJ

Please can you send responses on this topic by 31 May 2023.

The text in this document is offered to you by members of the Book of Discipline Revision Committee. We look forward to reading and hearing your reactions to it.

Yours, in Friendship

Catherine Brewer, Rosie Carnall, Co-clerks and Michael Phipps, Assistant Clerk  
Book of Discipline Revision Committee

## **2.00 The Meaning of Marriage: we are but witnesses**

### **2.01 Introduction**

Marriage is a lifelong, unconditional and serious commitment. It is a spiritual union with important emotional, physical and legal aspects. It joins two people who promise to be and to stay a couple. The declaration of this commitment is made to each other, to the meeting, to the community, to society, and to God in a Meeting for Worship for Marriage. The Quaker community also makes a serious commitment to support the couple on their journey. They are married in the care of the meeting and in accordance with the law.

From the early days, Quakers have stressed how central the Meeting for Worship is in the process. It is in worship that promises are made in the presence of God. We see our way of marriage as expressing the essence of Quakerism: we each have a direct relationship with the divine, and a personal responsibility to keep promises made. This chapter provides an overview of the Quaker understanding of marriage, the legal position of Quaker marriage, and how a Quaker wedding works.

### **2.02 Spiritual and Legal basis of Quaker Marriage**

#### 2.02.1

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.

George Fox, 1669

This quotation from a founder of the Quaker movement expresses our understanding of marriage as 'the work of the Lord'. In England and Wales Quaker marriages were recognised as legal by the Marriage Act of 1753. Scottish law allowed marriages to take place without a priest, so Quaker marriage has always been lawful there. Because some of our early marriages were not recognised in law, we kept very careful records and made sure that everyone who heard the declarations signed the wedding certificate as witnesses.

Quaker marriage is equally available to all unmarried adult Friends, whether in formal membership or not, regardless of the sex of the participants. In a marriage, the couple are equal partners. With the help of God, their love for each other can deepen and grow in a lifetime together.

#### 2.02.2

As human beings we long to experience love, to find it central in our lives; we want not only to be given love but to give it. Love liberates us from the prison of ourselves.

Transient as we are, we long for permanence. Most people, deep down, want relationships that offer that ever-after quality that novels discover on their final

pages. Marriage, tried and tested over centuries, is one of the best ways in which such everlastingness is helped to happen.

Quakers believe that same-sex marriage is important because we believe that we are all equal, and because we believe the quality of the love we offer to our partners is the same as everyone else's. The true measure of an intimate relationship is its degree of selfless love, a love that isn't proprietorial or exploitative, but tender, responsible, committed, equal; a love that feeds its transforming messages of hope and happiness benevolently into society day after day.

Rosie Bailey, 2014

To make the marriage legal and so that proper records are kept, the couple and the meeting must follow the steps agreed by Britain Yearly Meeting which are detailed in the Supplementary Volume. Area Meetings must appoint a Registering Officer who will make sure the marriage takes place according to Quaker practice and according to law.

### **2.03 Preparation before Marriage**

Friends know that it is essential to prepare fully for marriage. The couple and those supporting them should be clear that they have thought carefully about their future life together, and that they have dealt with any problems or obligations from their past lives. Meetings for clearness (see handbook) are a useful process for checking this.

### **2.04 The Meeting for Worship for the Solemnisation of Marriage**

The Meeting for Worship for a Quaker wedding is held, like all our meetings, in silent waiting for the movement of the Spirit. Ideally, in the meeting, the couple will gain help and inspiration to support them in their life together. It is a chance for those present to ask God's blessing on the marriage and to pray for them.

Thomas Ellwood, recalling his own marriage in 1669, wrote of the value of the Meeting for Worship: 'We sensibly felt the Lord with us and joining us, the sense whereof remained with us all our lifetime, and was of good service and very comfortable to us on all occasions.'

Quakers are clear that marriage is not just a civil contract, but a religious act. Those who gather for the Meeting for Worship for Marriage are witnesses and uphold the couple in celebrating their commitment to each other.

### **2.05 The Declaration**

When the Meeting for Worship is gathered, and when they feel led, the couple stand if they are able. Taking each other by the hand, they exchange their declarations of marriage using one of the texts below. They may speak in either order. These exact words must be used.

### 2.05.1 Declaration

Friends, I take this my friend . . . . . [full name] to be my spouse, promising, through divine assistance, to be unto him/her/[commonly used name] a loving and faithful spouse, so long as we both on earth shall live.

The following changes to the wording may be made. No other changes are possible.

- After 'Friends' and before the main declaration, the couple may add one of the following two phrases: 'In the presence of God' or 'In the fear of the Lord and in the presence of this assembly'.
- The word 'spouse' may be replaced by 'wife' or 'husband' as appropriate or by 'partner in marriage'.
- The phrase 'through divine assistance' may be replaced by the words 'with God's help'.
- The phrase 'so long as we both on earth shall live' may be replaced by the words 'until it shall please the Lord by death to separate us'.

The choice of alternatives must be agreed in advance by the couple and the registering officer. In any case, both must make their declarations in identical terms (or corresponding terms in the case of 'husband' and 'wife'). This is because their promises must be equal and reciprocal.

### 2.05.2 Datganiad

Gyfeillion, yr wyf i yn cymryd fy nghyfaill/nghyfeilles . . . . . [enw llawn] yn briod i mi gan addo, trwy gymorth dwyfol, y byddaf iddo ef/iddi hi/i [enw a arferir yn gyffredin] yn briod cariadus a ffyddlon gyhyd ac y byddom ill dau byw ar y ddaear.

- Gellir cynnwys, fel rhagymadrodd i'r datganiad, y geiriau 'Ym mhresenoldeb Duw' neu'r geiriau 'Yn ofn Duw ac ym mhresenoldeb y gynulleidfa hon'.
- Gellir defnyddio'r gair 'gwraig' neu 'gŵr' yn hytrach na 'priod' fel y bo'n addas, neu 'partner mewn priodas'.
- Yn hytrach na'r geiriau 'trwy gymorth dwyfol' gellir dweud 'trwy gymorth Duw'.
- Yn lle'r geiriau 'gyhyd ac y byddom fyw ar y ddaear' gellir defnyddio 'hyd nes y gwêl yr Arglwydd yn dda ein gwahanu trwy angau'.

Ni oddefir unrhyw newidiadau eraill i'r geiriad. Rhaid i'r cwpwl gytuno ar eu dewis o eiriad gyda'r swyddog cofrestru ymlaen llaw. Ym mhob achos rhaid i'r ddau sy'n priodi ddefnyddio'r union eiriau (neu eiriad cyfatebol wrth ddefnyddio 'gŵr' neu 'gwraig') ac mae'n rhaid i'w haddewidion fod yn gyfartal a chyfatebol.

The marriage of a couple is a legal contract from the moment both have made their declarations.

## 2.06 The Quaker wedding certificate

At an appropriate stage during the meeting – usually shortly after the declarations have been made - a previously prepared Quaker certificate confirming the declarations is signed by the couple and two or more witnesses. It is then read aloud, usually by the Registering Officer. After the meeting, it is customary for all who heard the declarations made to sign this certificate so that all can declare themselves as witnesses, and mark their commitment to the care of the marriage.

## **2.07 Declarations in other languages**

Should one or other of the couple wish to use any language other than English or Welsh, there must be an interpreter present to affirm that the declaration is an accurate translation of the set wording. In these cases, the English or Welsh declaration should also be made.

### **2.07.1**

It was an extraordinary meeting for worship – in three languages and in a packed meeting room. Tears flowed and laughter did too. The bridegroom was twenty three and Welsh, the bride twenty two and Swedish. Love and support flowed towards the pair as they each in turn made their promises in both Welsh and in English. Others rose to speak of marriage and the journey of the Spirit; of Swedish Friends' love of the bride and of the public witnessing by all present of what was a reality already – the God intended partnership of the two.

Towards the Source, 2014

## **2.08 Celebration of commitment**

Some couples may wish to have a Meeting for Worship in loving support of their commitment which omits the legal requirements. Such meetings are under the care of Elders, but they liaise with the Registering Officer so that it is clear the Meeting for Worship does not have the legal status of a marriage.

### **2.08.1**

I knew I would want a Quaker wedding and also that he couldn't make vows that required use of the word God. I wouldn't want him to either – a life's promise needs to be made authentically.

I said yes to the relationship without knowing how the wedding part would work. Then, having said yes, way opened. I discovered I didn't mind in the least if the paperwork for marriage was done at the town hall; it was the Meeting for Worship with family and friends that would be our wedding.

Our wedding day was completely whole, entirely authentic for us. Our sons (his two, my one) were with us at the town hall, two friends who were our witnesses, and my aunt, his mother. The administrative ceremony was first thing in the morning, we went for lunch in a cafe and then arrived to the Quaker meeting in the early afternoon. Our many guests had been advised to

get a seat early and when we walked into the crammed meeting room a great silence of love held me in its purpose.

We made our vows, a close version of the Quaker words with him omitting the word God. There was some silence, much vocal ministry, laughter and tears. Our relationship was wrought together stronger through the mystery we experience in sitting together in a Quaker meeting. The strength of that mystery helps me every day, helps us, although the paperwork is also good to have.

Rosie Carnall, 2020

## **2.09 Support for the couple**

The responsibility of the Area Meeting to support and uphold the couple continues for the rest of their lives. All Quakers are responsible for upholding married Friends wherever that marriage took place, at a religious or a civil ceremony.

Quaker marriages hope to be founded on love, truth and trust. However, in every relationship the couple may face differences and conflict. The meeting should be aware of the need for support in these difficult times and has a responsibility to be sensitively helpful to all couples.

### **2.09.1**

True love is proven when the loved one begins to be not only the mysterious beckoner of destiny, but becomes also the occasion of dull indubitable duty. At a frontier of life when one partner begins to say to him or herself: 'How can I love any longer? But I must love', then sometimes steadfastness and faith have power to nurse into existence the new being needed as companion and lover. What a triumph when old love is transformed into a deeper surer new love which can accept more fully what each has, and the pair find a rebirth together in those things which are eternal, and through this a renewal of their every-day living.

London Yearly Meeting, 1959

One person cannot keep a marriage alive if their partner has withdrawn their commitment in whatever way. If all efforts at reconciliation and resolution fail, it is right that the marriage ends. This means that there is the possibility of remarriage. This is a sensitive issue. Meetings should be aware of the pain and hurt of promises not kept. Before someone remarries in a Quaker wedding, the individual and the meeting should be clear that the person intending remarriage is genuinely committed to a lifelong partnership with the new spouse. Marriage should not be entered into, or left, lightly.

### **2.09.2**

The simple Quaker wedding where the couple, together with their friends, gather in worship is for Friends the most natural setting for the two concerned

to make a commitment to each other in the presence of God. With their declaration they take each other freely and equally as lifelong partners, committing themselves to joining their lives together in loving companionship, asking God's blessing on their union. Friends have always seen both members of a marriage as 'equal comrades'. With God's help their love for each other can deepen and change in a lifetime of marriage together.

Britain Yearly Meeting, 1994