



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

Quaker marriage declaration

Collection of responses to Meeting for Suffering's consultation on a possible change to the declaration

Background

In December 2023, Meeting for Sufferings received a paper from the Book of Discipline Revision Committee regarding the Quaker marriage declaration (paper MfS 2023 12 08 available [here](#)). The committee asked two things:

- First, to allow flexibility over the use of pronouns. Meeting for Sufferings was advised this was a minor change on which it could make a decision. Meeting for Sufferings agreed to this change and this has been implemented.
- Second, it asked Meeting for Sufferings to consult area meetings and others over whether the couple to be married can be offered the choice of using 'through divine assistance' or 'with God's help', or to use neither of those phrases in the marriage declaration. Meeting for Sufferings agreed to facilitate this consultation and to return to this at its meeting in October 2024.

Meeting for Sufferings invited responses from central committees and other bodies, area meetings, and individual Friends. This document brings together the responses that have been received.

On this second matter, a change to the marriage declaration would be considered a major alteration and would be taken to Yearly Meeting for final discernment.

Note on presentation:

The responses have been included as supplied. Responses from central committees and other bodies in part A, area meeting responses in part B, and individual responses in part C. Where local meeting responses have been included as part of a response from an area meeting these have been left within the area meeting response.

A. Responses from central committees and other bodies

Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations (QCCIR)

Marriage Declarations in the manner of Friends

Introduction and Summary

- 1 The BYM Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations has been invited to comment on the current provisions for marriage in the manner of Friends and the wording of the declarations of the parties in particular.
- 2 The name that this standing committee of the Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends bears makes clear that we act as a faith body in our relationships with other Christian and interfaith bodies. Our identity as a religious body enables us to build and hold those relationships, and it is from this position that we offer comment on the matter of Quaker marriage.
- 3 We recognise the faith diversity of Quakers in Britain, which we do not challenge. This paper addresses a more particular matter, that is the nature of marriage as a religious commitment as well as a legal undertaking. It is in that context that we have considered the current form of marriage in the manner of Friends as an option for adherents of our faith. In the UK, secular and religious couples, may now choose from a range of forms of marriage ceremony that are equally valid under the law. A sub-set of those forms is the faith-based marriage ceremony with its religiously-grounded declarations. In the current Quaker form, marriage in the manner of Friends is 'not a civil contract but a religious act' (Quaker faith & practice 16.14). It is against this broad offering of marriage form diversity that we offer up our discerned contribution to this consultation amongst Friends. In doing so, we do not seek to diminish or discount the validity of any particular form of marriage, held under any authority, including those not in the manner of Friends, but respect and value the choices that people have available to them to enter into this commitment on terms that are true to their integrity.

QCCIR Reflections

- 4 Section 16 of *Quaker faith & practice* reads:

16.01 *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)*

16.14 *We think it right to remind our members of the ancient testimony of our Society, that marriage is not a mere civil contract, **but a religious act.***
(Yearly Meeting in London, 1848)

16.17 ***Quaker marriage is not an alternative form of marriage available to the general public, but is for members and those who, whilst not in formal membership, are in unity with its religious nature and witness. The Marriage Acts relating to England and Wales require this and our criteria apply equally in Scotland and elsewhere in the yearly meeting.***

- 4 This section of our current Book of Discipline (*Quaker faith & practice*) presents a Quaker interpretation of the theology that underpins the joining together of Friends in marriage. It is reflected in “*A Spirit-led church*”, section 3.5:

Recently, Quakers in Britain have experienced a remarkable example of the holy Spirit outrunning our expectation. In 2009, after many years of prayerful preparation, and during an exercise of corporate discernment and waiting on God, we came to understand that, in our experience, God was marrying same-sex couples and that we needed to recognise this and witness to it in our own procedures and in our relations with the state.

[*A Spirit-led church*, QCCIR, 2016]

- 5 QCCIR advises that to abandon the core tenets of Quaker theology and historic interpretation of scripture on such a matter as marriage - to any religious body, a sacred estate - would be to undermine our identity as a faith organization in this country and beyond. To move away from religious language in the Quaker marriage process would constitute a theological change that could make it significantly harder to defend our existing discernment around equal marriage of same-sex couples to other parts of the Quaker and wider faith world. Within the current frame of that faith debate, other churches might question on what basis Quakers can really say they are led by God in their discernment on marriage, or, indeed, on anything at all. QCCIR fears that opening this up in a process of moving away from religious language in our marriage liturgy would seriously undermine public trust in Quaker discernment both within and beyond this Yearly Meeting.

- 6 To consider the detail, we refer to section of *Quaker faith & practice*, 16.52, which reads:

When the meeting for worship is gathered, the couple at a convenient time shall stand, if able, and, taking each other by the hand, declare in an audible and solemn manner, the one after the other in either order, each saying:

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 declaration may be prefaced by ‘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’. No other changes to the wording may be made. The choice of alternatives shall 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’); their promises must be equal and reciprocal.

- 7 It is clear that the words under scrutiny at this time are those relating to theist terminology, and it is this to which we have paid attention.
- ‘In the presence of God’
 - ‘In the fear of the Lord and in the presence of this assembly’.
 - ‘through divine assistance’
 - ‘with God’s help’
 - ‘so long as we both on earth shall live’
 - ‘until it shall please the Lord by death to separate us’.
- 8 Under the laws of the UK nations, the Religious Society of Friends has an historic right to conduct meetings for the solemnisation of marriage under its own registering administration. This right has been upheld in successive legislation on the basis of the faith attestations set out in Qf&p16.17 above and the subsequent prescriptive sections. QCCIR is very much aware and welcoming of the development over the 20th century for a significant number of Friends, some in long-standing membership, to have been led away from a personal belief in a transcendent Supreme Being, or God, but not out of Quakerism as a faith body. The diversity of belief within liberal Quakerism that emerges out of continuing revelation through personal experience means that individual religious belief can be at variance with the corporate position, as determined from time to time by the Yearly Meeting in session, of the Religious Society of Friends, the recognised religious entity.
- 9 QCCIR is minded to advise that the Religious Society in Britain should maintain its religious characteristics for matters that demand religious authenticity. We are not convinced that changing the marriage form and declarations made by the parties to be more “inclusive” of those who cannot honestly say the religious words offered would have the desired effect of making the body of members more truthful and equal in that act. The Quaker

theology of marriage is quite clear: **“for we marry none; it is the Lord’s work, and we are but witnesses.”** We must not deny what Quakerism actually professes: that we are part of the priesthood of all believers, bearing witness to the presence of the living spirit of Christ in our midst.

- 10 We recognise that there are many reasons of personal experience for why some Friends cannot say words weighted with a religious reality that is not their own. For some, religious words raise some past trauma which they have not been able to transcend. We owe them the love we profess, and any alternative choices they make for their solemnization of marriage must be acknowledged and respected by all Friends. In other places, where the marriage is to be conducted in forms and places that are not conforming with the laws of civil registration, many couples now also opt to legalise their marriage prior to the wedding day in what is known as a ‘Statutory Ceremony.’ This is a very basic legal ceremony held at a local register office (for a minimum fee). This option allows the couple to celebrate their marriage in their local Quaker meeting house, not governed by any legal restrictions. This celebration is deeply personal to the couple involved and can be honoured in full in a Quaker Meeting for Worship that does not require any unfelt religious commitment on their part. The words of declaration may be chosen by them, individually or jointly and in consultation with AM Elders, and can reflect their own statement of spirituality before all Friends present, as they enter into their new life together. These can be joyous and exceptional Meetings for Worship, in which the couple can say whatever they like as promises to one another and those present can record their witness. This is not to be seen in any way to be ‘second-class Quakerism’ but is to be respected as an alternative choice of the non-theist couple who wish their wedding to be celebrated in a Quaker setting.

Young Friends General Meeting

Separated Minute 7 on Marriage Declarations 2024.05.7 Marriage: What words do we use?

Meeting for Sufferings is currently consulting on proposed changes to the declarations made as part of the Quaker marriage process.

Currently, the wording of the declaration requires both people getting married to promise either ‘with God’s help’ or ‘through divine assistance’ to be a loving and faithful partner in marriage. In various places in the declaration, individuals can use the wording most appropriate to them, and we welcome the recent addition of the option to use any appropriate pronouns for people, in addition to the options of ‘him’, ‘her’ or the person’s first name.

The consultation asks two questions: firstly, should there be the option to say neither 'with God's help' nor 'with divine assistance'; and secondly, whether the option should be allowed for each person in the couple to use different wording.

We discussed these earlier in the weekend, in one of our Special Interest Groups, which has brought us the following report:

The key theme that came through in our conversations is that when you make a declaration upon entering into marriage, you're being true to your faith, and honest to your partner, and you're both making this promise to one another with the support of the thing that is most spiritually important to you.

We see it as essential that the declaration includes an element of asking for assistance, a recognition that this monumental promise isn't something to be kept alone. This could, in practice, be as simple as allowing an option for the declaration to include 'with assistance'.

We were strongly moved by 22.41 of Quaker Faith and Practice, the first paragraph of which reads "Marriage, says the Christian, is for life; and the wedding is a declaration that it is so. It is a fearsome declaration to make, and without the grace of God, arrogant and absurd..." [Harold Loukes, QF&P 22.41]

We could reluctantly accept the suggested option of making no request for assistance, but only on the basis that it is better than excluding those who cannot use either of the current options truthfully.

However, we much prefer the idea of adding one, or if necessary more, additional options. We suggest the wording "promising, and trusting that this union be held in the light, to be unto [them] a loving and faithful [partner in marriage]". We also discussed, with less unity, options including 'in the care of this meeting', 'with support from the worshipping community', and referring to the Spirit.

We felt a clear unity that each partner should be able to differ in the exact wording that they use among these options. We heard that the same words can mean different things to different people, and equally that different words can mean the same thing. The key principle is the notion that each person is being truthful in the promise that they are making, and that this is reciprocated with an equally truthful promise, irrespective of the chosen Quaker wording.

We unite with the report and agree to send this minute as YFGM's response to the consultation, emphasising that as young Friends, this is a matter that affects us, and that this will be a choice that many of us are considering or will be in the future.

We recognise the range of views on this within our own community, including around the degree to which there is a difference between the role of the divine, and the role of the community, in a marriage. We would welcome further consideration of the

optional prefixes to the declarations, which address these themes but which also contain wording that can be an obstacle for Friends of differing theologies.

Crynwyr Cymru–Quakers in Wales

2024.06.04 Minutes received

Further to minute 2024.02.05(ii) we have received the following minutes regarding the Meeting for Sufferings' consultation on possible changes to the wording of the marriage declaration.

Minute 24/24 from North Wales Area Meeting.

Minute 2024.05.07 from South Wales Area Meeting.

If any changes are made to the wording of the marriage declaration by Meeting for Sufferings, we ask that we are approached to give advice on the Welsh wording of the new marriage declaration.

We are pleased to note that Meeting for Sufferings has, following consultation with us, agreed the use of 'ffrind', an ungendered noun, for use in the marriage declaration, which is in section 16.53 of Qfp.

B. Responses from area meetings

Bournemouth Coastal AM

Minute 24.7.1. Marriage Declarations

Many would like to maintain being married into a spiritual community and being held in that spiritual community.

The question is how do we leave space for those who do not want to use the word God or “through divine assistance” in their declarations and would the wedding still be Quaker?

Cambridgeshire AM

24.06.42 Reports: b) Area Meeting Elders & Pastoral Friends 20th April 2024

We endorse the minute on the marriage declaration sent by AM Elders & Pastoral Friends to Area Meeting, reproduced below, and ask the clerk to send it to Meeting for Sufferings.

2. The Marriage Declaration.

Meeting for Sufferings has asked Area Meetings to consider whether there should be an option to omit the phrases ‘with God’s help’ and ‘through divine assistance’ from the marriage declaration. Our clerks have circulated the Meeting for Sufferings papers including minute MfS/23/12/08, together with the pamphlet ‘We are but Witnesses’ in which the theological basis of the decision to allow same sex marriage is explained.

We recognise that there are those amongst us who reject belief in God or the word ‘God’. This gives us a dilemma. We want to show our love for them as they try to find a way that is truthful to their own integrity. Nevertheless, we also have to consider our own integrity as a community, a religious community whose understanding of marriage is that it is ‘the Lord’s work’. This is a fundamental of our religious commitment as well as our legal position.

We advise the Area Meeting that phrases that recognise that marriage is a religious commitment should remain in the marriage vows.

We see no objection to each partner having a phrase of their choice rather than identical phrases. It might be that another phrase with reference to the Spirit or the Light could also be a choice. We note that it is possible for Friends to have a civil ceremony which might be followed by a meeting for celebration where Friends could choose their own words.

As our culture becomes more secular, we have to determine how to maintain our witness to the presence and work of God in the world. Our discussion has raised many questions including what beliefs are looked for when coming into membership.

We affirm our commitment to being witnesses to the work of the Lord both in marriage and in the creation of a loving community.

Central England AM

Minute of Central England Area Meeting held on Wednesday May 22nd at Selly Oak Meeting House

2024.052 Revision of the Book of Discipline: Wording of the Marriage Declaration

We have received the following minutes and report from Local Meetings, all of which will be forwarded to the Committee for the Revision of the Book of Discipline.

Minute from Barnt Green and Redditch Local Meeting BGR 2024.31 The Book of Discipline – revised wording of the Marriage Declaration

This was considered at our Meeting for Business today (5th May); Barnt Green & Redditch Meeting is content for the wording to remain as stated.

Minute from Bournville Local Meeting 2024.10 Revision of Book of Discipline

In December 2022, the Book of Discipline Revision Committee issued two draft chapters on Nominations and Marriage. As well as Bournville Friends responding individually, several of us discussed this and responded as a group. Once again, we have been asked to comment on these same two draft chapters. Meeting for Sufferings have a particular query: it is whether the terms of the Quaker Marriage Declaration should require both parties to state that they will be loving and devoted partners with “God’s help” or with “Divine assistance” – as it does at present.

We recognise that this has been discussed for a number of years at Yearly Meeting and that there are a range of different views. Some of the differing views have been expressed in our own meeting.

Several friends feel it is important to retain the expressions, ‘with God’s help’ or ‘with Divine assistance’. We feel it is important to recognise that we are a religious society of friends and not a secular society; we are aware of our traditional belief in God. However, we recognise that some non-theist friends in our community are not comfortable with these expressions. A couple of friends have suggested that there might be an option of having alternative expressions, such as ‘promising to be a loving and faithful partner’. In one friend’s view, this matter is less a question about revising the book of discipline, but rather questions about how broad we want our community to be and how do we make space to include people.

Minute from Bull Street Local Meeting

The Book of Discipline Revision Committee is considering the terms of the Quaker Marriage Declaration, and whether it should require both parties to state that they will be loving and devoted partners with 'God's help' or 'with Divine assistance', as it does presently. We feel that this should remain the wording of the declaration.

Sutton Coldfield Quaker Meeting

Study group on the revised Marriage section of the Book of Discipline 25/02/24

We agree that Marriage is a serious religious and spiritual commitment and that we would wish Quaker weddings to be offered only to couples who accept that and are making the commitment in that spirit.

The preamble before the declaration is well written, clear, and helpful.

Regarding the declaration it is fair to say we are not fully in unity. The following quotes summarise key points and reasoning expressed.

1. We have never known anyone to use the form of words "In fear of the Lord" at their wedding. This wording is archaic and easily misunderstood – especially by non-religious people who might be attending a wedding. We doubt that it should still be included.
2. I find it strange that "in the presence of these witnesses" is only available when linked with "the fear of the Lord". The latter being unusual language these days and the former being fundamental to gathering of Friends for a marriage.

Thereafter most discussion and ideas revolved around language, especially the use of "God" which could exclude our non-theist Friends whom we have accepted into membership. Could the Book of Discipline offer an alternative wording which recognises the spiritual element of the commitment but does not use God language? This would be an option for non-theists - excluding any reference to God's help or divine assistance, but those with a belief in God would continue to be able to use the current wording. Could the Registering Officer have discretion to agree with the couple on a variation to the wording that still expresses the religious and spiritual nature of the commitment?

Some agree that the Celebration of Commitment provides a way around the problem. Others felt that if we agree that it is right to find a way around a rule, that suggests that the rule was badly formed and should be amended.

Comments submitted from 2 Friends unable to attend the workshop:

- Another option might be not to make the wording of the vows mandatory, but then I would suggest with that any agreed variations, it should be made clear that they have been specifically requested by the bride and groom at the

marriage meeting. Of course, some qualified Quaker wedding officiants may not be willing to accept non-God wedding vows which might close this option to them.

- I think that if two Friends announce their intention to marry and declare their commitment to one another in a Meeting for that purpose, then they are married. I don't feel that either the form of words or the invocation of a Higher Power are important.

It is clear from these minutes and from spoken ministry in this Meeting that while some Local Meetings are clear in their view that we should stick to the current wording, others are not in unity. There is a tension at the heart of these considerations: we are a religious society that also includes many non-theist Friends for whom the current options are problematic. How inclusive do we want to be?

Some Friends who have had a Quaker wedding themselves spoke movingly about the importance of asking for divine assistance, which includes the support of their Local Meeting at the time. If we believe in that of God in everyone, this needs to be central to the words used during the marriage service.

There is a sense that it would be acceptable to have a third statement alongside the existing two options that better accommodated non-theist Friends, but we are not a secular society and therefore this alternate statement also needs to include reference to the spiritual nature of the commitment of marriage. As it states in Advices and Queries 23, "Marriage has always been regarded by Friends as religious commitment rather than a merely civil contract."

Chilterns AM

Minute 24.07.09 Meeting for Sufferings

ii. Proposed Changes to Marriage Declaration

Our local Meetings have each considered the questions posed by Meeting for Sufferings in December 2023 in relation to changes in the wording of the Quaker marriage declaration, with responses requested by 31st August 2024.

- i) Whether it is necessary to use the words either "with God's help" or "through divine assistance" in the declarations.

There is profound agreement on the special nature of a Quaker marriage, as first set out by George Fox in 1669 (Quaker Faith & Practice 16.01), and a desire to retain the idea of the spiritual nature of the commitment between the couple, as opposed to a civil contract.

However, our Meetings are divided between those who believe that this meaning would be lost without reference to God or the divine, and those who hope that a third form of words may be found that accommodates the beliefs

of non -theist Friends while retaining the deeper sense of the meaning of a Quaker marriage.

Some fear was expressed that changing the wording could threaten the special status accorded to Quaker weddings in law.

The contrasting view was also expressed that, having admitted non-theist Friends into Membership, we should not then exclude them from core elements of Quaker practice.

One Meeting suggested an option for a third alternative wording which might be acceptable to non-theist Friends, while retaining the sense of a spiritual commitment between the couple:

- through (or with) a commitment to the light that is within us all.

ii) Whether both couples should be required to use identical wording

Again, our Local Meetings were not fully in unity on this. There was a shared belief that the declarations should be equal and reciprocal. But there was a division between those who believed that this required the wording to be identical, and those who felt that – so long as there was no legal impediment - each partner might choose their own version of the declaration, each one having equal weight.

In addition, while we understand that the matter of the use of the pronoun ‘them’ as an alternative to him or her has already been settled by Meeting for Sufferings, we note that several of our Local Meetings pointed out that the issue could be avoided by the use of the couple’s given names throughout the declaration. Our Registering Officer expressed concern that this matter seemed to have been decided by Meeting for Sufferings without consultation with the Membership or with Registering Officers.

Cornwall AM

Cornwall Area Meeting 4th May 2024

Minute 6. The Wording of Quaker Weddings

The question of whether the references to God and the divine can be considered optional in Quaker weddings has challenged us greatly. It was considered by our constituent Meetings, most of which sent minutes to this Meeting.

We have continued to reflect on this today but are unable to come to unity. We noted that this is a fundamental change to our long-standing legal right to conduct weddings. We understand that the couple may not have to use identical words as they are currently required to. We heard that as we don’t have a priest, the couple more directly marry each other, changing the words does not alter that, any language can be challenging, yet having God’s help or divine assistance in speaking

our truth reminds us that there is something greater to call on when difficulties have exhausted our own resources, and the spirit may be called upon to guide us.

Craven & Keighley AM

At a meeting of Craven and Keighley Area Meeting held on Saturday 8 June 2024

Extract of minutes - 2024/40 Substantive topic: the wording of the Marriage Declaration

At its next meeting, Meeting for Sufferings is to consider further the wording of the current Marriage Declaration and has asked for area meetings to respond by minute if they have discernment to offer on the issue of whether:

In the marriage declaration can each of the couple be offered the choice of using 'through divine assistance' or 'with God's help', or to use neither of those phrases.

Bentham LM has minuted (minute 8ii of their meeting on 28 April refers) that they are content that both the currently used phrases should remain.

We have considered this matter and, conscious of the hurt that can be and has been caused by our current practice of Friends having to agree on the same phrase in the marriage declaration whether or not they believe it to be true, it is right that each Friend should have a choice of words.

However, we believe that the inclusion of a reference to the need to draw on something beyond one's own strength is essential to the promise of marriage in a religious setting. Thus there should be a third phrase offered to the couple rather than just the option of using neither of the current phrases. Reference to drawing on the loving support of the meeting, or from the power of love, or goodness, or truth, would seem to us to be the right way forward.

Cumberland AM

Cumberland Area Quaker Meeting held June 22nd 2024 at 10.30am

Minute 24/25 Proposed changes to the marriage declarations

We have discussed the proposed changes and agree the following minute to be sent to Meeting for Sufferings:

We would prefer that both partners make the same commitment to each other.

The Meeting was divided about whether the couple should be given the option of not mentioning God or divine assistance, many feeling that Quaker marriage is a religious compact. However it was pointed out that some Quakers are non-theist and should not be excluded.

East Cheshire AM

East Cheshire Quaker Meeting held 13 July 2024

24.07.18 Wording of the marriage declaration

Area meetings are being consulted by Meeting for Sufferings about the permitted wording of the marriage declaration and at our January meeting we agreed to consider this later in the year (Minute 24.01.08). The specific question in the consultation document is whether the declaration might be made without one of the phrases 'through divine assistance' or 'with God's help'. Further to this, we have received the following minute from Stockport Meeting held 5 May 2024.

Marriage Declaration

Tim Carlisle led a discussion meeting about marriage in general and the declaration in particular. Stockport Friends thought that all Quakers wishing to marry in a Quaker Meeting should be able to do so, using words which were acceptable to them. It was concluded that the declaration should remain as it is as a basis. However, it should allow for much more flexibility than the choice of alternatives available at the moment.

We suggest that the couple meet with the Registering Officer and Elders to decide together a form of words which expresses what the couple want to say, is agreeable to them all and fulfils legal obligations while retaining a spiritual content.

We agree to forward this minute to Meeting for Sufferings with the addition that we acknowledge the difficulty in finding words reflecting the Quaker understanding of marriage which we do feel it is important to include.

East Scotland AM

At our recent East Scotland Area Meeting held on 11th May, we recorded the following minute in relation to the wording of the marriage declaration...

"We have heard support for keeping the religious words. The marriage declaration is more than an individual commitment. It would be inconsistent to remove the 'God language' from the marriage declaration, whilst leaving it elsewhere in Quaker faith and practice.

The marriage service, recognised as valid in the eyes of the state, is one of the few interfaces between Quakers and the state. We are the Religious Society of Friends, so the wording is appropriate.' Extract from minute 24.05.08

Hampshire & Islands AM

Hampshire and Islands Area Meeting understand that views are sought on the wording of the marriage declaration in QfP. We asked our local meetings to consider this and have received the following views:

Minute from Winchester Local Meeting - 7.7.24

24.47 Wording of marriage vows

We have received a consultation document on possible changes to the Quaker Marriage Vows in Britain. We thank our Registering Officer, Graham Dragon for his personal opinion and response as Registering Officer and agree to forward it to Area Meeting (after asking for his consent to do so). We discern that other language could be considered, but the religious aspect of Quakers should be included in the wording.

Comments of Friend from Isle of Wight Local Meeting who is soon to be married

As someone who is about to enter into marriage through this process, I do agree that the points about pronouns and not insisting on the same declarations from each party are reasonable. My personal view, though, is that omitting any reference to religious beliefs and the hope to be upheld through those would make me feel uncomfortable. By its nature, a Quaker meeting is religious. Non-religious weddings are readily available. But perhaps other words could be acceptable, for example the universal spirit or some such, so that the words used can allow broader vocabularies that are less historically connected with traditional Christian beliefs, if that helps.

Jersey LM minute re changes to the marriage declaration

Area Meeting have asked for responses to Meeting for Sufferings' possible changes to the Marriage Declaration.

This Meeting is most concerned that there is talk of the deletion of words such as "God" and "the Divine" from the Quaker Marriage Declaration. We would like Meeting for Sufferings to express our concerns to Britain Yearly Meeting.

Hardshaw and Mann AM

40/2024 Marriage Declaration Wording

We accept that a change is needed to ensure that our marriages are available to both theist and non-theist Friends. We were not in unity about what the right approach should be.

Friends who have had a Quaker wedding spoke of the importance of their declaration but also that the ministry from Friends attending their wedding framed the spiritual basis of their marriage. As a Quaker ceremony, it was felt that any wording should be based in the foundation of Quakerism and reflect that Quakerism is a way. Our marriages reflect our process of discernment and it was noted that non-theist recognise a "something" even if they would not use the word "God" or "the Divine". A wording that doesn't make those references could still be Quakerly although it may change the emphasis of the declaration.

We value being able to perform a legal marriage and if there is a need to have a defined wording to do this, then a defined wording should be retained with alternatives.

Kendal & Sedbergh AM

Kirkby Stephen LBM Minute 24.5 03

Following January Area Meeting we have considered the wording of the Quaker Marriage procedure. We find it difficult to understand how two people seeking marriage in a Quaker environment can do so without referring to the divine, however expressed, Both parties should enter in to marriage in a spirit of compassionate understanding, and should use the same declaration of commitment so that the union starts on a basis of equality.

In the use of pronouns, we feel people should be free to use their own choice.

Preston Patrick LBM: Minute 24/05/04

We agreed the following re possible changes to the wording of the marriage declaration Qf&p16.36

Several of us met on the 17th March to discuss the marriage declaration made by a couple during a Quaker wedding. This discussion took place in response to a request from Meeting for Sufferings.

We support the use of language that is non gender specific, if the couple wish. We have no objection to each of the couple making a slightly different declaration. This would need to be agreed with the Registering Officer beforehand We would prefer to keep the phrases, 'with divine assistance', or 'with God's help', but would support the dropping of the phrases ' In the fear of the Lord, and until it should please the Lord' We ask our clerk to forward this to the AM Clerk

Brigflatts LBM Minute 24/5/8

The Society of Friends' marriage declaration wording. This is under review. In response to a minute from Meeting for Sufferings, AM has asked us to contribute to this review – see AM minute 24/1/7: "We are asked to discern the wording relating to the terms "With God's help" or "With Divine Assistance" and the use of pronouns in the marriage declaration"

The current wording, we feel, is on the whole appropriate and reflects the fact we are a religious society. The essence of the vows is simple and beautiful as well as part of our Quaker tradition. We hope the core of it will be retained: "Friends, I take this my friend, [name], to be my spouse*, promising, to be unto him/her/[commonly used name] a loving and faithful spouse *, However, we do value the flexibility of the vows and recognise a need for this, We are happy with the idea that pronouns could be

changed and wondered if a third phrase as an alternative to “With God’s help” or “Divine assistance” might be offered, such as “with spiritual support or guidance”. We acknowledged that couples may wish not to say “so long as we both on Earth may live” bearing in mind greater longevity and the higher percentage of divorces. We suggest this might be an optional phrase as some may not be comfortable with it but that the words be retained in our guidance for couples to consider.

Kendal LBM Minute 24.03.03

Our LBM response to Area Meeting on the request from Meeting for Sufferings on the potential changes to the Quaker marriage ceremony.

Friends were provided with a copy of Meetings for Sufferings minute MfS/23/12/07. The part of the minute that MfS asks LBMs through their Area Meetings to comment on is as follows

“First, we agree that the text of the book of discipline approves the use of the pronoun ‘them’, or another pronoun as appropriate, as an option in the declaration. Second, we have considered whether the terms ‘through divine assistance’ or ‘with God’s help’ in the declaration must be used and whether both members of the couple must say the same declaration. We note the decision on this second matter rests with Yearly Meeting on advice from Meeting for Sufferings.”

We have considered the use of the terms in the marriage declarations made by the couples and wish to submit the following as our response to KSAQM for their consideration:

We are happy with the idea that each member of the partnership can use different words. We agreed that there should be four options:

1. With God’s help
2. With divine assistance
3. Nothing in this category.
4. New words discerned by MfS or Yearly Meeting.

We hope that there could be exploration of different words that include a spiritual dimension. We note the importance of the upholding of the Quaker community and also the need for a clearness process for the partners prior to agreement that a Quaker marriage will be held by a Meeting.

Kingston & Wandsworth AM *24/62 Quaker Marriage Commitment*

Meeting for Sufferings has asked Area Meetings in their briefing paper 2023 12 08 to consider the question: *In the marriage declaration can each of the couple be offered the choice of using ‘through divine assistance’ or ‘with God’s help’, or to use neither of those phrases.*

We have considered this question, and we have a diversity of views on this. Whilst some of us are comfortable with allowing all three options, others among us would not be comfortable to use neither of these phrases. We believe that as a Society we should address the wider question of the religious nature of the Religious Society of Friends, to provide clarity on these and similar matters.

Lancashire Central & North AM

Please find below the discernment of the Elders of Lancaster Central & North AM in relation to the call for consideration of the proposed changes to our Marriage Declaration.

The Elders of Lancashire Central and North AM met to discuss the proposed changes to the Quaker Marriage Declaration. Our response is as follows:

1. We agree that each party to the marriage should be able to choose whichever of the two current phrases they are most comfortable with.
2. We see the phrases 'with God's help' or 'through divine assistance' as faith statements not credal statements. They imply a faith in something 'other'. ie God or the divine, but do not define that other. We are a religious society and see a faith statement as an essential part of our marriage process. The current phrases recognises that those undertaking marriage are engaging in a process with religious roots, grounding and meaning. Without a faith statement we would be no different from a civil marriage.
3. We are open to reflect on other phrases but are content with those in the current usage. Any new wording would need to reflect that we see marriage as a spiritual union.
4. The basis of our acceptance of same sex marriage, as well as being about equality, is the Christian position on marriage, that is, that it is God who marries and 'we are but witnesses'. To remove God from our marriage declaration would undermine the theological basis on which we discerned the rightness of accepting same sex marriage and thus the basis on which QCCIR relates to the Christian churches and other faiths about marriage.
5. We caution against changing the theological basis of one aspect of our life together.

Leeds AM

Leeds Area Meeting held on 16 June 2024 Minute 2024/06/15 Quaker Marriage Declaration

In January we asked local meetings to consider questions sent to us by Meeting for Sufferings, regarding the Quaker Marriage Declaration.

We have received minutes from Adel and Rawdon (meeting jointly), Carlton Hill, Gildersome, Ilkley and Roundhay, which are attached.

In local meetings, Friends have appreciated the opportunity to spend time reflecting on the meaning and nature of the Quaker marriage declaration, and to share their personal experiences of Quaker and other weddings.

We have heard that a Quaker wedding is a deeply sacred and spiritual occasion and is different to a non-religious wedding.

We also note that currently the marriage declaration is the only time that Quakers are currently obliged to make a theological statement.

In discerning this matter, Local Meetings have reached different conclusions. Most Friends in this AM accept that it is appropriate to revise the marriage declaration, to reflect Quaker faith as it is experienced now. However, we feel any wording should make it clear that the marriage is being witnessed within a faith community and that the declaration is spiritually led.

Friends in this AM do not feel it is necessary for both Friends to make an identical declaration.

We forward this minute, with the local meeting minutes attached, to Meeting for Sufferings.

Minutes from Leeds Area QM local meetings

Adel and Rawdon Meeting for Worship for Business held on 21st May 2024 Minute 1 – Marriage declaration

We have met this evening to consider if the wording of the Quaker marriage declaration should be revised.

We agree that the wording should be changed so that the couple can choose one of three options.

“Friends, I take this my Friend (full name) to be my spouse, promising, through divine assistance/with God’s help/(neither of these two phrases), to be unto him/her/(commonly used name) a loving and faithful spouse, so long as we both on earth shall live.”

We do not feel that those marrying need to make an identical declaration providing they both choose one of the options above.

We hope that couples can choose pronouns they feel most comfortable with.

We know how fast language changes and that the current revisions will last a number of years. We hope that Friends will demonstrate a willingness and flexibility to use new terms for partner, so that Friends of all genders and none will feel included.

Carlton Hill LQM held on 2 June 2024 Minute 7 Marriage vows

Area Meetings have been asked to consider the marriage declaration that can be used in Quaker Weddings.

The Question for consideration is “In the marriage declaration can each of the couple be offered the choice of using ‘through divine assistance’ or ‘with God’s help’, or to use neither of those phrases. CHLQM held a discussion in February at which we shared experiences of being married in Quaker weddings or choosing to have our weddings in other ways. Sometimes these choices were because of the current wording which excluded some from having a Quaker wedding. We note also that the Quaker wedding vows are the only time as Quakers where we are currently obliged to make a theological statement.

We were encouraged from our discussion to think the change was positive. We concluded that if we have a sense of God, the important thing is that God is felt in the room and in the marriage, and the words God or divine, are not needed for that presence.

Gildersome Meeting held on 25 February 2024 Minute 2024/8 on the Marriage Declaration

We are a believing Church going back through history. We need to continue to have a spiritually led service. We agree that the wording chosen should be in line with the spirit of Quakerism, be that ‘through divine assistance’ or ‘with God’s help’ or some other appropriate wording. We think that it should not be essential for both parties to use the same wording.

Ilkley Quaker Meeting held on 19 May 2024

Response to Meeting for Sufferings regarding the possible change in the Quaker marriage declaration: Minute following Food for Thought meeting on 19 May 2024

A Quaker wedding is a deeply sacred and spiritual occasion and is very different to a non-religious wedding; the declarations need to reflect this.

However, people come into Quaker membership with a wide variety of understanding of the divine, and Quaker weddings should encompass this. The meaning of words and the way they are used has changed subtly over the years. In the past ‘through divine assistance’ covered a wide range of beliefs, but is now understood in a more limited way. New phrases are required using words that reflect the way we talk about religion now, for example using ‘spirit’ and ‘light’.

We feel that each of the couple should be able to choose a different option for the marriage declaration, as we are uneasy about people feeling they have to say a phrase they do not really believe.

In summary, we would like to see changes to the phrases in the marriage declaration that reflect our Quaker community now, but which retain the spirituality and religious nature of the occasion.

Roundhay Business Meeting held on 9 June 2024 Minute 3

A proposal has been made through Meeting for Sufferings to change the wording of the marriage ceremony. Janet Edmunds has read the wording as laid down in the current edition of *Quaker Faith and Practice* and the proposed changes. We discern that a change in the wording of the declaration so as to omit any reference to God or the Divine is inappropriate in the context of the Religious Society of Friends.

Leicester AM

Leicester AM Business meeting held 30 June 2024

Minute 24.42: Consultation on changes to the Marriage Declaration

In December 2023 Meeting for Sufferings (MfS) asked Area Meetings to consult with Friends on a proposal to change the Marriage Declaration by dropping the requirement to say, 'through Divine assistance' or 'with God's help' and allowing each partner to make their own decision on this. The full MfS minute has been circulated in documents in advance.

The first question is whether one of the God or divine assistance phrases must be included in the declaration. We know that some people marrying using the Quaker form have difficulty with using God language in the declaration. This was compared with swearing on the Bible or affirming in court; both alternatives commit to doing the same job. It would be helpful if the god language were optional. This is about inclusivity and we know of Quaker atheists who might want a Quaker wedding.

On the other hand, when the Society decided on same-sex marriage we said we did not marry people – God did. It seems odd to now agree to drop mention of the divine from the marriage declaration. Why would a couple want a Quaker wedding if one of them could not include the divine in their declaration.

On the second question of whether both parties should be obliged to make the same declaration we reached no decision.

We hope these notes help MfS make a recommendation to Yearly Meeting.

Luton & Leighton AM

24.06.07 Meeting for Sufferings

- a. Meeting for Sufferings held on 1st June 2024. We thank Neil Morgan for his report which is attached for the record. This is Neil's last Meeting for Sufferings report to Area Meeting, we thank him for his service.
- b. Feedback request from Meeting for Sufferings on our Quaker Marriage procedures.

Further to our minute 24.02.08 We have circulated information from Meeting for Sufferings asking Area Meeting to respond to its call for discernment on two further questions on the Quaker Marriage Declaration being considered by the Book of Discipline revision committee:

- a. Should each member of a couple hoping to be wed be required to make the same declaration? and
- b. Must the declaration include a reference to God or the divine, or is a third option, omitting these words, possible?

We have received minutes and comments from our local Meetings which indicate that we would wish to maintain the spiritual nature of a Quaker Marriage. Some Friends would like to maintain the current wording and requirement for couples to use the same declaration but many would welcome the suggestion that a) each member of the couple should be able to make different declarations and b) that a third or fourth option should be allowed where the declaration doesn't need to include a reference to God or Divine thus respecting and recognising the different individuals spiritual journeys, their different religious interpretation and use of language.

Friends accepted this minute and asked that the clerks to forward this minute to Meeting for sufferings together with the feedback responses from our local meetings.

I have been asked to add that some Friends felt this was a case of 'non essential liberty,' that the Society of Friends was holding on to something unnecessary. A Friend spoke of his marriage to his catholic wife, in a catholic church where the vows were changed in order to accommodate his not being a Catholic and not wishing to make a promise to be a good Catholic.

I have also been asked if the revision committee are considering the final sentence of the Quaker marriage declaration. This was the comment;

The phrase about on earth shall live or until it shall please the lord by death to separate us. I hope will be changed. Many divorced couples will say they went into marriage expecting it to be forever but circumstances changed. The emotional damage and guilt done by divorce is bad enough without dealing with unpacking a promise to God and the Quaker Meeting of a life long union which has been unable to be fulfilled. The promise on marriage could perhaps state an intention to be lifelong or just say that you promise to try to be a faithful wife/husband/partner.

Quakers marry couples where one or another is divorced accepting that sometime a fresh start is needed. Couples may feel very uncomfortable making a further lifelong commitment a second time because it feels dishonest or because they know that sometime things change.

From Milton Keynes "Minute 24.05.07 Quaker Marriage Declaration

Clerks have received several responses to the request for views on proposed changes to marriage declarations, which were requested following LLAM clerks' request for Local Meetings to provide feedback on the proposals prior to the June Area Meeting.

Most respondents agreed that it should now be allowed that the words 'through divine assistance' or 'with God's help' could be omitted from the vows if those getting married were uncomfortable using those phrases.

However, some Friends were concerned that if any such phrase were omitted, there was a danger that a Quaker Marriage might end up having no spiritual dimension.

Interestingly, no Friend expressed the view that the two current phrases should be the only ones available, and some Friends suggested possible alternatives, referencing, for example, the spirit, stillness, or – in one case - more than one god.

Most respondents also agreed that the two getting married should each be able to make their own choice of phrase independently. The reason, when expressed, was usually because the two getting married may have different spiritual outlooks, but that this need not be a bar to them getting married.

There were nonetheless some who would rather the couple continued to state the same phrases, as an expression of their commitment to each other.

Further changes were suggested to the subsequent phrases in the vows which, though interesting, were outside of the scope of Area Meeting's request.

We thank participating Friends for the time and trouble they have taken to consider these matters and provide their reflections.

Hemel Hempstead LQM MfS/23/12/07 Marriage declaration

Last year the Book of Discipline Revision Committee shared draft text on the topic of marriage and received feedback from Friends asking for consideration on the wording of the marriage declaration. Michael S Booth, BYM's Church Government Adviser, has provided a briefing paper.

We agree to both recommendations in the paper.

First, we agree that the text of the book of discipline approves the use of the pronoun 'them', or another pronoun as appropriate, as an option in the declaration. Second,

we have considered whether the terms ‘through divine assistance’ or ‘with God’s help’ in the declaration must be used and whether both members of the couple must say the same declaration. We note the decision on this second matter rests with Yearly Meeting on advice from Meeting for Sufferings.

We aim to give our recommendation to Yearly Meeting in 2025. To do so we will reconsider this at Meeting for Sufferings in October 2024. We invite minutes from area meetings, general meetings, and minutes from other Quaker bodies, and comments from individuals to be sent by end of August 2024

Meeting discerned the following minute at our Meeting for Business on Sunday

24.03.09 Quaker Marriage Declaration

In answer to both these very important questions, Friends agree that while Quakers are a religious society, we do not dictate and have no doctrine. Marriage is a personal decision for couples and we should leave these options open for them to discuss and agree in preparation for their marriage. These words are beautiful.

From Leighton Buzzard LQM

Marriage declaration consultation – Local Meetings have been asked by Area Meeting to consider the proposed alternatives to the Quaker Marriage Declaration.

Our responses included these comments...

- a. The present declaration is quite moving and there seems to be no reason why they should not say the same thing. As solemn declarations they should be the same. It should not exclude the giving of additional vows from the heart.
- b. A third option could be 'the power of love', which could be what 'God' or 'Divine' means. Would omitting reference to God make it the same as a civil ceremony? Use of 'Light' may be another possibility. Some would have problems with leaving out all reference to the divine. Having a marriage within a Meeting for Worship is key and the words used are flexible. We ask the Clerk to forward these comments to Area Meeting.

At Bedford LBM on Sunday 7th April this minute was agreed "24.04.05 Revision of Quaker Faith and Practice Marriage Procedure

With reference to minute 24.03.07 paragraph 3 Meeting for Sufferings requested Area and Local Meetings thoughts on proposed changes to the wording of the Marriage procedure. Bedford Meeting had a frank discussion regarding wording. Clerks were asked to bring to this meeting a draft minute for consideration. The draft minute has had much thought and prayerful support and reads:

Bedford Friends heard from those who had had a Quaker wedding as well as those who had experienced church and secular weddings.

We know that family life in the 2020s shows a different family profile than family life in the 1990s. Many Quakers are the single Quaker in their family, which means that more marriages now will be between people of different faiths and none.

We realise that the couple preparing for marriage in a Quaker context will be supported by the local meeting and the area registering officer. Those present at the marriage are all witnesses and all sign the certificate.

We hope that each party to the marriage will be acting in sincerity and love and using the language that will support them in their married life. We hope that each party will be able to choose the language which expresses the voice of their conscience.

Some Friends in our meeting expressed doubts about having a Quaker Marriage if no reference to 'the divine, God, spirit, or that which is beyond and within 'is made.

Others recognised that sincerity and conscience might prevent use of this language for at least one of the parties.

There are so many ways to reference the intangible support that Quakers call the inner light or the seed of life.

Meeting agrees to accept the draft minute and asks today's clerks to forward the minute to Area Meeting. "

Harpenden LQM

Friends have agreed the following statement about the Quaker Marriage declaration:

We are sympathetic to:

1. allowing each member of the couple to use a different wording.
2. allowing a wording which does not use an explicit reference to God or Divine assistance.

We want the declaration to be as inclusive as possible, recognising that each individual may have different theological beliefs. We would like an alternative wording to be considered which might refer to 'guided by Love'.

Berkhamsted LQM

Quaker Marriage proposal. We had circulated the paper in advance and Friends welcomed to opportunity to consider it. Our minutes capture the discussion and a formal minute records our view.

MINUTE: In the Quaker Marriage Declaration, we agreed that the use of preferred pronouns was an important change, and was a mark of respect for those getting married. We also support the optional use of references to God and the divine, respecting the wishes of those getting married to use one of the phrases or not. We also suggest that Meeting for Sufferings might consider an additional option which

refers to 'the Light' and allow for the couple to agree their own phrase for God with the celebrant if none of the options appealed.

From St Albans LQM

The following comes from the most recent Elders meeting on April 21st.

Wording of the Marriage Declaration. This has been discussed, and information previously circulated. There have been no dissenting comments received about the proposed change.

From Watford LQM 21.06.24 Marriage Declaration

We thought about the changes proposed to the marriage declaration.

As a meeting we felt that the use of the phrases "though divine assistance" or "with God's help" should be retained.

We would like to encourage couples to use the same phrasing, as this suggests equality between the couple.

However we had a variety of ideas and felt that a good conversation with a couple seeking a Quaker marriage was the most important part to explore what they understood by the words used and the impact of this on their marriage.

Mid-Somerset AM

2403/10 Quaker Marriage wording

Mid Somerset Area Meeting Friends have experienced a strong ground of feelings and beliefs on the possibility of excluding the word God or the Divine from our Quaker marriage ceremonies and ask that those words God or The Divine will not be omitted on any occasion from our Quaker marriage ceremonies. We hope our new book of discipline will reflect that.

Long Sutton LM minute 2403/12 Quaker Marriage

Meeting For Sufferings has requested that Local and Area Meetings consider the request from some Friends to have an option to omit any reference to God or the Divine in the Statement of Commitment made during Quaker Marriages. We have considered this fully in a Hearts and Minds session held in a spirit of worship and we ask our Area Meeting to consider our leading that within this Meeting, we feel strongly that such reference to The Divine, must be included in any marriage commitment within our religious society. We hope Area Meeting will feel called to forward our leadings to Meeting for Sufferings as they have requested and we copy below, the notes from our discussion (18.9.24).

As requested by Meeting for Sufferings minute MfS/23/12/07 Marriage Declaration, we have met to consider the wording of the marriage declaration. This follows the

publication of the revision of Chapter 16 as discerned by the Book of Discipline Revision Committee.

We found unity in a deep conviction that the acknowledgement of the spiritual dimension of marriage is essential. We are a religious society and feel strongly that this should not be set aside on any occasion, it is part of our identity. All are welcome to our worship and we wish to be inclusive but we felt we could not accept a declaration with no reference to the divine. The wording should not deny God in order to accommodate other beliefs or non belief.

'it is the Lord's work, and we are but witnesses' George Fox

Perhaps further options for the wording may be acceptable and the declarations need not be identical but we cannot be all things to all people; this will fail. Have we moved on so far from the fundamental spirituality of our acceptance of same sex marriage?

There are other options available for a secular marriage, which may then be celebrated in the manner of Friends, if any mention of God in the declaration is unacceptable to the parties involved.

Marriage is a lifelong commitment and if made under the care of a Meeting there is loving care and support around it, underpinned by our relationship with God whether acknowledged or not.

'Marriage has always been regarded by Friends as a religious commitment rather than a merely civil contract' (Advices and Queries 23)

Norfolk & Waveney AM

A group of interested Friends gathered to consider the matter. Here is our response:

- We find we do not favour changing the current wording of the declarations.
- Words are important, but they are not what the undertaking of marriage is about. They help us, both as a means to express the depth of commitment and as a reminder that the strength we need comes from beyond ourselves (e.g., "with divine assistance").
- The words of the declaration need to be set, for the couple, in a context of understanding that words for the deepest and most serious matters can only be approximate and are metaphors for a greater reality. This framing, that words point to something we understand and relate to beyond words, can be set out in the introduction to the chapter and in the preparations with the Registering Officer/s.
- We feel the new draft introduction (2.01) is very useful in placing marriage within a meeting for worship and within a Quaker community and showing it to be an exemplar of what the Quaker way is and does, and that this emphasises that it is spiritual and not merely a secular process.

- We hope that it would be possible for both partners in a couple to say the same words as each other, showing that they agree and understand the same kind of commitment.

North East Thames AM

14th July 2024

24.56 Quaker faith & practice chapter 16: revised text

We have circulated a paper from Meeting for Sufferings and have considered possible changes to the Quaker marriage declaration and the choice of phrases ‘with God’s help’ or ‘through divine assistance’ or another option. We support ‘with God’s help’ or ‘through divine assistance’ as reflecting the basis of a Quaker marriage. We support the exploration of another option as well.

North Somerset AM

24.31 Proposed change to Quaker Wedding Ceremony

Our Registering Officer Meryl Shephard introduced the proposed changes. She highlighted that the matter was raised as part of the revision of Quaker Faith & Practice. Meryl read QF&P 16.01 (George Fox 1669) on the meaning of marriage, which will not change.

The main consideration relates the proposed change to allow couples to omit the phrase ‘with God’s help’ or ‘with divine assistance’.

We received minutes and feedback of discussions which took place in all three of our Local Meetings. These reflect the view that as the Religious Society of Friends, we should retain a phrase which reflects reference to a power beyond ourselves. A phrase such as ‘with God’s help’ or ‘with divine assistance’ should be retained but we recognised the value of an alternative such as ‘drawing on the strength of the Light within’. We did not feel that both parties need to use the same phrase.

North Wales AM

Minute 24/24

Meeting for Sufferings/Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) is consulting the BYM-wide membership on their views on the current text of our Quaker Marriage Vows. Individual Friends and meetings have already submitted their responses online via the Book of Discipline Revision Committee. It has become apparent that a few Friends wish all reference to the divine/Spirit to be removed from this text.

Now we have been asked by Crynwyr Cymru/Quakers in Wales (CCQW) to consider that proposition as an area meeting. CCQW asks for our response to be sent to them by June.

The current version of the text (in both languages) was circulated beforehand.

We were not entirely clear whether both parties have to include reference to divine assistance in their vows.

We were mindful of the fact that we have an appreciable number of non-theist Friends among us whom we would not wish to exclude from Quaker marriage – leaving out reference to the divine seems more inclusive.

But we also felt that excluding all mention of the divine would be a strange thing to do for a Religious Society. We are aware that the words 'divine' or 'God' can be interpreted in many different ways and may be seen to be vague enough to be acceptable to most. Other forms of marriage are of course always available to us – without wanting to appear exclusive or un-Friendly!

We heard that being a Quaker means recognising the mysterious Other that goes beyond self, and which may guide us in our Quaker lives.

On balance, we felt that we certainly do not want to exclude mention of the divine, being a religious society, but that we would like to see the personal option of excluding reference to it, in the spirit of inclusiveness, respect for diversity and allowing honesty and sincerity during the ceremony. We are aware that not all Quaker marriages are between two Quakers.

Oxford & Swindon AM

Consultation on wording of Quaker marriage declaration Oxford and Swindon Area Meeting minute of 9th March 2024

13/2024 Quaker Marriage Declaration (re. min 03/2024 b)

In our January AM, we heard that Meeting for Sufferings had been asked by the Book of Discipline Revision Committee to consider the Quaker marriage declaration. MfS agreed to invite minutes and comments from area meetings, other Quaker bodies and individuals so that it could reconsider this in October 2024 before making a recommendation to Yearly Meeting. Responses (to sufferings@quaker.org) are requested by the end of August.

A briefing paper signed by Michael S. Booth, Church Government Adviser, was circulated to our LMs in advance of this AM and printed copies are available.

The question under consideration is: "In the marriage declaration, can each of the couple be offered the choice of using 'through divine assistance' or 'with God's help', or to use neither of those phrases?"

Our current Registering Officer and Acting Assistant Registering Officer are present with us today, and Judith Baker has introduced this subject to us.

The current chapter 16 of Quaker faith and practice – Quaker Marriage Procedure – was agreed by Britain Yearly Meeting in 2015. (This is published as a separate

booklet.) Judith has stressed that the change being considered is not simple: it “would be a fundamental alteration of Quaker theology”.

We thank Judith Baker for her informative and insightful introduction and ask that her paper be made available to local meetings through the AM clerk.

We ask our local meetings to give time to discussion and discernment on the question before us, and to send our clerk an account of their reflections by 15th June, whether this be in the form of a discerned minute, or notes or a report of discussion groups. We have heard that Charlbury LM has already begun this work. In addition to the briefing paper, the following resources may help us in this task:

We are but witnesses, September 2009

A Spirit-led church, QCCIR, January 2016

A Spirit-led church – a study guide for Friends, August 2015 We shall return to our consideration of the Quaker marriage declaration at AM on July 13th

Responses from LMs as sent to Oxford & Swindon AM

Abingdon Local Quaker Meeting Minutes of the Special Meeting for Worship for Business held on 21st April 2024

24/23 This special business meeting is being held to consider possible changes to the marriage declaration. The clerk has received some contributions from people who could not be here today.

The Book of Discipline revision committee has asked Meeting for Sufferings to consider the marriage declaration. Meeting for Sufferings has asked Area Meetings and Friends in general to consider a possible significant change to the wording and Area Meeting has asked Local Meetings to consider the matter.

The change we are asked to consider is “in the marriage declaration can each of the couple be offered the choice of using ‘through divine assistance’ or ‘with God’s help’ or to use neither of these phrases”. This is a significant matter as it would have implications for Quaker theology.

To assist with the discernment today a paper from Michael Booth, the BYM Church Government adviser, and a paper prepared by Judith Baker, previously our Area Meeting registering officer, have been distributed prior to the meeting. Judith Baker introduced the topic.

It is possible for a couple to have a registry office wedding and a meeting for worship to bless the marriage. The letter killeth but the spirit giveth life.

As we are the Religious Society of Friends, we believe that we need a spirit-related phrase in the marriage declaration. A third possibility may satisfy those who have

difficulties with the alternatives in the current declaration. Possible phrases are “led by the spirit” or “with love’s assistance”.

We do not believe that is necessary for both of the couple to use the same phrase.

*Burford Local Quaker Meeting Meeting for Worship for Business, 7th April 2024
24/38 Discussion Group*

We met to consider our Marriage Declaration as requested by AM, on 21st April. This was an open, frank and wide-ranging discussion, in which all were especially careful in holding others and their beliefs mindfully and respectfully throughout. There were differing standpoints on Quaker theology, on historic change, the meaning of words in different contexts, the essence of marriage and more. We were unable to reach unity on this matter, but agree there is a need to live with the questions longer.

Charlbury LM: Response from Charlbury Quakers’ discussion group

A small group of Friends from Charlbury LM met after MfW on 18th February as previously advertised, to reflect on the paper from Meeting for Sufferings on the words for the Quaker marriage declaration.

There were different views on whether or not the current language should be changed, but a common sense that the different forms of words for the declaration should include wording that reflects the spiritual or divine if not God (although there was no objection to ‘with God’s help’ being retained for those who wished to choose this wording). So, the couple might have the choice of using ‘with spiritual guidance’, or ‘with God’s help’, or ‘through divine assistance/supported by divine love’.

It was agreed no-one should be required to say words they don’t believe. However, there was strong concern among those at the meeting about having the option of language in the marriage declaration which was effectively humanist, particularly in light of the reference in the current advice on marriage contained in Advice and Queries 23:

‘Marriage has always been regarded by Friends as a religious commitment rather than merely a civil contract. Both partners should offer with God’s help an intention to cherish one another for life.’

It would be good for those wishing to have a Quaker wedding to reflect, with the Registering Officer, on their understanding of the spiritual or divine, when they are preparing for marriage.

We offer this note as a contribution to discussion at OSAM and not as a formal record of the views of Charlbury Local Quaker Meeting.

Faringdon Quaker Meeting, Meeting for Worship for Business, Sunday 5th May 2024

6. Following a study session to discuss amendments to the marriage declaration, our meeting has drafted this minute:

In our meeting for worship we experience the workings of the Spirit expressed in the adapted words of William Penn, 'Live beyond the world' (QFP22.95)

We wish to retain the current wording, with Divine assistance and God's help, and not to adopt the option of using neither of these phrases.

We suggest a third option using the words 'with the help of Spirit'.

Marlborough and District Local Meeting, Meeting for Worship for Business, Sunday 5 May 2024

b. We have been asked to consider the proposal that in the Quaker marriage declaration each of the couple be offered the choice of using 'through divine assistance' or 'with God's help' or neither of these phrases. The feeling of this Meeting is that we do not support change to the declaration, although we would strongly reaffirm that our Meeting welcomes those of all faiths and none. Some of us have had the experience of supporting a couple in a Meeting for Worship held after their recent non-Quaker marriage and we would encourage those uncomfortable with current Quaker marriage wording to consider this option. We have no concerns about the use of pronouns.

Oxford LM

We discussed the proposed change to the marriage declaration: that each of the couple be offered the choice of using 'through divine assistance' or 'with God's help', or to use neither of those phrases. We also discussed whether the couple may each use a different form of words. We felt that marriage in a Quaker setting is a religious act, but felt that the form of words itself is only the end of a process of discernment. Although marriage is a delicate and personal matter, each marriage is entrusted to the care of the meeting. The marriage declaration touches the heart of our faith. Different views were expressed about its wording.

Some expressed the need for other alternatives such as "in the Light" or "with spiritual assistance". There was an acknowledgement of the need for support for the couple. There is an alternative of marrying in a registry office, in which context the act of marriage can still be spiritually meaningful. This can be coupled with a meeting for worship for the celebration of commitment.

Swindon LM (These notes were agreed a fair record at a meeting for worship for business held 7th July 2024.)

Notes of the discussions held on Wednesday 15th and Sunday 19th May 2024 at Swindon

Quaker Meeting regarding possible changes to Quaker marriage declarations.

11 Friends took part.

Overall Swindon Friends have not reached unity on this matter; the key issue is whether allowing a marriage declaration without specific mention of God/divine assistance would greatly change the identity of Quakers as a religious body. Specific points made by Friends are:

1. Allowing couples to use a form of promise which does not include any reference to God or divine assistance would offer inclusion for a group of Quakers who may describe themselves as Atheist, non-theist, or simply not feel that their faith would allow them properly to refer to receiving help from God. Nevertheless, these people may have a strong sense of belonging to The Religious Society of Friends. If no change is made to the marriage declaration, these Quakers could continue to be offered a Meeting for Worship combined with a Registry Office Wedding. For some this might feel like a rejection. Quakers generally seek to be inclusive and this appears to be an opposite stipulation.

2. Removing any reference to God in the marriage declaration would be a significant shift for Quakers. This could set Quakers on a course for being more of a mindfulness community and, over decades, may contribute to bringing about the demise of Quakers as a distinct religious body. If we drop reference to the Divine, it will call into question our relationships with mainstream Christian churches.

Friends holding to this view felt that 'divine assistance' offered plenty of latitude for the experience of individuals. They also pointed to the 'We are but witnesses' document where Quakers set out their understanding that they had been led through divine guidance to offer same sex marriage. Would that same divine guidance now lead us to take out all reference to God or divine assistance, when requested?

3. Quakers do not place any conditions upon attenders at Meetings for Worship; our boundaries here are porous. We do not require a particular expression of belief in The Divine as a condition of membership though we do refer to 'the understanding of divine guidance' as one of the 'fundamental elements of being a Quaker' (F&P11.01). But marriage is not membership; it seems to go against the normal practices of Quakers to be prescriptive in marriages only.

4. A different suggestion was made by one Friend – that the couple agree the form of words to be used with the registering officer with wide discretion available. However, this option is not currently being considered by the revision committee.

5. One Attender Quaker present had a Quaker marriage, and this was because it was the only option available for the couple where one party was solidly Christian and the other of no particular belief in God, that would accommodate their need for a genuine expression of their understanding. They chose to use the words 'through divine assistance'. At the time she would have preferred leaving this out, but felt that 'divine assistance' was broad enough to be said sincerely.

6. Another Friend wanted to emphasise that a Quaker marriage is an expression of the whole community's intent. Therefore, the wording available needs to be congruent with the community's understanding.

Oxford and Swindon Area Meeting minute of 13th July 2024

37/2024 Marriage Declaration discernment (ref. mins 30/2024; 13/2024; 03/2024b)

Further to minute 13/2024 in which we asked our local meetings to give time to discussion and discernment on the question of the wording of the Quaker marriage declaration, we have received written responses from seven of our LMs. A document comprising these responses was circulated in advance of this area meeting.

Three LMs, Abingdon, Faringdon and Marlborough, have sent discerned minutes from a meeting for worship for business expressing their wish to retain the current wording, 'through divine assistance' or 'with God's help'.

Charlbury Quakers held a discussion group on the question and reported a "common sense that the declaration should include wording that reflects the spiritual or divine, if not God".

Burford's discussion group revealed differing standpoints, albeit mindfully and respectfully held, and a "need to live with the question longer".

Over two well-attended opportunities for discussion, Swindon Meeting's experience was that "overall Friends have not reached unity on this matter; the key issue is whether allowing a marriage declaration without specific mention of God/divine assistance would greatly change the identity of Quakers as a religious body." Their written notes, agreed as a fair record in meeting for worship for business on 7th July, expand on this exploration and on specific points made by individuals.

Oxford's minute 16/2024 includes: "We felt that marriage in a Quaker setting is a religious act, but felt that the form of words itself is only the end of a process of discernment.

.....The marriage declaration touches the heart of our faith. Different views were expressed about its wording."

As an Area Meeting gathered today, we have acknowledged the desire to be both inclusive and true to our identity as a religious society. While noting that the consultation briefing paper asks simply whether the couple can be offered the choice of using one of the existing phrases, or neither, we would like to suggest consideration that another spirit-related phrase, such as 'led by the Spirit', might be included.

We ask our clerk to forward to Meeting for Sufferings the full responses from our local meetings, together with the relevant minutes from Oxford and Swindon Area Meeting.

Abingdon Local Quaker Meeting Minutes of the Special Meeting for Worship for Business held on 21st April 2024

Minute 24/23 This special business meeting is being held to consider possible changes to the marriage declaration. The clerk has received some contributions from people who could not be here today.

The Book of Discipline revision committee has asked Meeting for Sufferings to consider the marriage declaration. Meeting for Sufferings has asked Area Meetings and Friends in general to consider a possible significant change to the wording and Area Meeting has asked Local Meetings to consider the matter.

The change we are asked to consider is “in the marriage declaration can each of the couple be offered the choice of using ‘through divine assistance’ or ‘with God’s help’ or to use neither of these phrases”. This is a significant matter as it would have implications for Quaker theology.

To assist with the discernment today a paper from Michael Booth, the BYM Church Government adviser, and a paper prepared by Judith Baker, previously our Area Meeting registering officer, have been distributed prior to the meeting. Judith Baker introduced the topic.

It is possible for a couple to have a registry office wedding and a meeting for worship to bless the marriage. The letter killeth but the spirit giveth life.

As we are the Religious Society of Friends we believe that we need a spirit-related phrase in the marriage declaration. A third possibility may satisfy those who have difficulties with the alternatives in the current declaration. Possible phrases are “led by the spirit” or “with love’s assistance”.

We do not believe that is necessary for both of the couple to use the same phrase.

Sheffield & Balby AM

At our Area Meeting held on 12th May we recorded the following minute and encouraged Friends to write in directly to you regarding this matter if they so wished:

Area Meetings are asked to consider whether the terms ‘through divine assistance’ or the ‘with God’s help’ in the declaration must be used and whether both members of the couple must say the same declaration.

As a Religious Society we feel that there should be some recognition of the spiritual life that we share. A greater range of wording could be used. We are aware that there is the opportunity for couples to have a celebration of commitment if one or both of them does not wish to use religious words.

Non-Quaker partners and non-theist Quakers should not feel coerced into saying words they do not believe. Some non-Quakers also have a “Testimony” to truth.

South East Scotland AM

Following discussion at Meeting for Sufferings of the Quaker marriage declaration, the following minute was recorded at South East Scotland Area Meeting in session at Kelso Meeting House, 22 June 2024:

2024/06/07 Wording of Quaker marriage declaration

Meeting for Sufferings is consulting area meetings and Friends generally on the question: in the marriage declaration can each of the couple be offered the choice of using 'through divine assistance' or 'with God's help' (as at present set out in *Quaker faith & practice* 16.42), or to use neither of those phrases?

This has arisen in the course of revising the Quaker book of discipline. Articles have been included in recent editions of *Sesame* giving the background.

We are agreed that the marriage relationship requires something beyond that which the couple themselves can contribute. In worship, we are waiting for something beyond ourselves. We feel this is expressed in the phrase 'with divine assistance'. Any revised wording should include reference to the power of the spirit, as well as to the support of the Quaker community within which the marriage is taking place.

South Wales AM

At a meeting of Cyfarfod Rhanbarth De Cymru South Wales Area Meeting held Saturday 18 May

Minute 2024.05.07: Marriage declaration

We receive a minute and report from the Being Quaker Living Quaker meeting on 27 April and are reminded of the Meeting for Sufferings briefing paper. The question Friends are asked to consider is as follows:

In the marriage declaration, can each of the couple be offered a choice of using 'through divine assistance' or 'with God's help', or to use neither of those phrases.

We have considered this matter and the feeling of the meeting is that each of the couple should have the choice of the wording. We feel that the discussion of the wording should be part of the marriage preparation process. This process of agreeing the wording can be seen as the couple joining the flow of the river.

As well as the two existing options we would prefer to see a brief third option rather than nothing. We think that the marriage declaration should include something which acknowledges spiritual assistance for the couple.

Southern East Anglia AM

Southern East Anglia Area Meeting Saturday 22 June 2024 at Earls Colne

Minute 24.25 Changes to the Marriage Declaration

In response to a request from Meeting for Sufferings for Area Meetings to consider changes to the marriage declaration to offer a choice within the current wording between 'with divine assistance,' 'with God's help' or nothing, we have received responses from Colchester LM and Earls Colne LM.

Colchester LM

There was no objection at the last Local Meeting to Meeting for Sufferings's proposal that the wording of the marriage declaration be modified, to allow the words "through Divine Assistance" and "with God's help" to be optional, and that both members of a couple be not required to make the same declaration.

I hope this is sufficient for Area Meeting's requirements, but feel free to let me know if anything more is required.

Quaker Marriage Wording – Response from Earls Colne Friends

After Meeting for Worship on Sunday 16 June the five Quakers present considered the question, asked by Meeting for Sufferings on behalf of the Book of Discipline Revision Committee.

In the marriage declaration can each of the couple be offered the choice of using 'through divine assistance' or 'with God's help', or to use neither of those phrases?

We were not unity in this matter. Two views were held.

There is a view that 'none of these' would be acceptable, even that the couple could suggest their own wording. As we welcome all people; of other denominations and faiths, non-theists and those of no faith to our Meetings for Worship, Quaker Marriage may be open to all who acknowledge the Quaker Way.

The alternate view was that 'none of these should' not be an option. The use of either 'with divine assistance' or 'with God's help' supports the couple in their marriage commitment and it recognises that the Quaker Meeting and those present also make a commitment to support the couple. All present sign the Quaker marriage certificate marking that commitment.

Surrey & Hampshire Border AM

24/01/02 Marriage Declaration Wording Change

We have considered the two possible changes to the agreed Quaker Marriage declarations, as provided by Meeting for Sufferings.

We have heard how a Quaker marriage is a religious ceremony. We are currently the Religious Society of Friends. Our QF&P states "for we marry none; it is the Lord's work, and we are but witnesses" [16.01]. To remove the religious and Spiritual from the Quaker marriage declaration would make it little more than a civil ceremony.

We are concerned by partners making different declarations (gender and pronouns aside). This does not seem to be a sound basis for a binding legal document. Our sense is that both partners should make identical declarations.

We find ourselves concerned by the potential legal implications of either the declaration not being religious or identical. We fear that we could lose our special right to marry if such changes were made.

We feel that making the declaration optionally non-religious would imply that Quakers are becoming non-religious and therefore might lose what makes us uniquely both religious, inclusive and a home for religious seekers.

Teesdale & Cleveland AM

70/24 Marriage declaration wording consultation

Meeting for Sufferings have asked AM's to consider the wording of the marriage declaration in the revised book of discipline:

In the marriage declaration can each of the couple be offered the choice of using 'through divine assistance' or 'with God's help', or to use neither of those phrases.

After many contributions the feeling of the Area Meeting is that a declaration should be made either using one of the two existing wording options or an alternative form of words which should be within a spiritual framework for example "guided by the light within us". A Quaker wedding is a religious commitment.

Thaxted AM

Minute 2024.03.10 The Quaker Marriage Declaration

We are comfortable with the current wording of the Quaker Marriage declaration subject to one addition. We ask that the preferred pronouns 'they' and 'them' be included as alternatives to 'him' and 'her'.

Wensleydale & Swaledale AM

Minute 24/24 – Quaker Marriage Wording – Minute

A special meeting was held on line on Monday 29th April at 7pm to discuss the wording of Quaker Marriage Meeting as requested by Meeting for Sufferings. Six Friends plus one via email due to travelling at the time were all of one mind and agreed to the recommended options.

West Scotland AM

082/24 Marriage Declaration wording

As requested by Meeting for Sufferings we have considered the wording of the declaration made in the course of a Quaker wedding, and the use of the phrases "through divine assistance" or "with God's help".

Some Friends are comfortable with this language. However, we recognise that others have valid reasons for discomfort, and may be unable to make a religious declaration. When we come to a meeting for worship we come for something bigger than ourselves, however we feel able to express this.

Some Friends queried what is divine assistance, if it is not God? Whilst others felt that the breadth of the phrase was helpful.

We have heard of the importance of the Quaker community in upholding the marriage. Perhaps it might be appropriate to refer to “in the presence of our faith community” as an alternative to the divine or God. The phrase “through the Light within us” was also suggested as an alternative phrasing.

There are also other aspects to a Quaker wedding and marriage, as well as the wording of the declaration. The preparation, the community’s support, and the foundation of the ceremony within a Quaker Meeting for Worship all contribute to the significance of a Quaker marriage. However, the declaration is important too. The reminder of divine assistance can be a source of strength in difficult times of a marriage. Knowing that the Quaker community is with you can be a similar strength.

If we have no mention of God or the divine, then what separates a Quaker wedding from a secular one? As a religious body does there need to be some reference to something beyond ourselves? Without this, does the responsibility then fall wholly on the people in the marriage, and is this sustainable? Honest marriage requires a recognition of how authority, responsibility, and support are shared.

The use of the word “promising” has also been questioned. Could alternatives be considered, such as “intention” or “undertaking”?

Throughout our discussion, a recurring theme has been community. The Meeting and the wider Quaker community take on responsibility for supporting and nurturing a Quaker marriage. This is reflected in the structure of a Quaker wedding, which offers all present an opportunity to speak. This is true whether or not we are comfortable with the use of language like “divine” and “God”. We accept into membership Friends who cannot use the word God, so we cannot insist on its use in this context. We must look beyond the word into the meaning and commitment behind it.

Quaker understanding does not draw a distinction between the religious and the secular, and we need to support the differing expressions and interpretations of the individuals involved.

We feel the suggested changes would provide options for a range of views and beliefs, and agree with the proposed changes to the declaration.

West Weald AM

Minute 24/53

We agree that a third Quakerly option to the terms 'with God's help' or 'through Divine assistance' would be useful.

We agree that the couple being married need not say the same declaration."

Lesley Evans
Clerk

West Wiltshire & East Somerset AM

Proposed Revision of the Quaker Marriage Declaration

Chippenham Meeting met to discuss this on Sunday July 21st after Meeting for Worship, there were 9 present, comprising 5 Members and 4 Attenders with contributions from 3 who were away.

Pronouns (Minor alteration) - we had no objection to the addition of 'them'.

Major Alterations - "Through divine assistance " or "with God's help" or neither of these.

One of us felt that the word 'God' brought back too much baggage from a childhood of C of E Sunday School and then Bible Study classes when the teaching was that God was a patriarchal figure looking down from above. She would prefer 'Light', or 'Love', or 'something all pervading', or 'spiritual assistance' if no other was available.

Those present who had been married in a Quaker wedding or had been at one, spoke of feeling the presence of something deeper than the words and would not like to see references to God and the divine left out.

The question arose of the anomaly that a statement of a belief in God is not necessary for Membership, but is required in the Marriage Declaration.

For some, the solution is a Civil ceremony followed by a Quaker Meeting for worship.

We omitted to discuss whether or not both parties should make an identical declaration or whether one could be different.

The whole discussion raised a deep concern among us that we are in danger of losing our Religious Society of Friends and becoming a purely secular organisation, this would be in complete contradiction to the beliefs on which our Society was founded and which have upheld us for 400 years.

I have been asked to include this paragraph in addition to the above- -

Those present who had married in a Quaker wedding, and had also read at a Civil Ceremony, spoke of the presence of something deeper than the formal words.

That presence might be called God or Love or Light.

That would still be present, even without using 'God' or 'Divine' in their declarations.

They therefore felt happy for the third option: using no reference to God, so that Friends choosing that option could retain integrity in their declarations.

Wirral & Chester AM

24.56 Quaker Marriage Declaration

Our three local meetings have held discussions following a call from Meeting for Sufferings for discernment on two revisions to the Quaker Marriage Declaration.

Seven documents were circulated in Documents in Advance for this area meeting:

- Quaker Faith & Practice 16.52 - The Quaker marriage - Declaration
- Wirral & Chester Area Quaker Meeting – March 2024 Minute 24.30
- Birkenhead Quaker Business Meeting – April 14 2024 Minute 2024/20
- Chester Meeting – 21 April 2024 Report
- Heswall Meeting – 12 May 2024 Report
- BYM Young Friends (aged 18 plus) - Minute 2024.05.7

The documents show that there is a diverse range of views from our three local meetings, both on whether the couple should say the same words and on whether to include the current form of words.

We agree to send this minute to Meeting for Sufferings, appending the documents listed above.

Birkenhead Quaker Business Meeting, April 14th 2024 2024/20 Wording of Quaker marriage ceremony

The feeling of this meeting is that if possible couples should have the choice of whether they make the same declaration and whether they declare a reference to God or the divine or omit these words.

Chester Meeting – 21 April 2024 Report Marriage declaration

Chester Friends gathered in worship to consider our response to the proposal to change the wording of the Quaker marriage declaration to omit reference to God or to divine assistance and whether both participants should use the same words.

We began by reminding ourselves of George Fox's declaration that marriage is "the Lord's work". A wedding takes place in the context of a Meeting for Worship. Declarations must be made as the couple hold hands, all at the wedding are witnesses. The declaration is a legal requirement but it has been agreed that pronouns can be changed.

If the declaration is changed whatever is written in "Faith & Practice" will be the legal requirement, this is not optional.

We considered if omitting any reference to divine assistance would affect our relationship with other churches. We also acknowledge that times have changed and many, if not most at a Quaker wedding, have no knowledge of our ways and explanations before the ceremony are more important than ever. Would omitting any reference to God or the Divine render our marriage ceremony a civil ceremony and not a religious one. Non-theists struggle with the use of these words. Yet if we no longer acknowledge an outside greater power than ourselves do we become a humanist and not a religious society.

As we reflected on the matter we came to think about the wedding process. Before a Quaker wedding, Area Meetings should hold a Meeting for Clearness with the couple, prepare them and give continuing spiritual and pastoral care. It is a unique, thoughtful process and is used to establish that a Quaker wedding and marriage is right for the couple. Within this process could be the opportunity to discuss what is understood by the word God or the divine. We know and celebrate that they are words for something for which we have no word but cannot, at this time, find other words without historical weight. We felt that reference to help from outside ourselves or “with the help of that of God within me” is part of making the wedding ceremony a spiritual experience.

If, despite preparation and discernment, a declaration with reference to the Divine or to God cannot be made in good faith we asked whether a civil ceremony, with a subsequent Meeting for Worship to bless the marriage, could be a way forward.

It is important to us that both parties should be prepared to understand what is entailed by having a Quaker wedding. We also felt that both parties should use the same words.

We closed in worship hoping that the way forward for the Society of Friends will become clear.

Heswall Meeting – 12 May 2024 Report. Heswall Local Meeting MfW : Quaker wedding declaration 12th May 2024

Present: 14 Friends and attenders

We are asked by MfS via AM to consider 1) whether we agree with the current wording :

- ‘with God’s help’ / with divine assistance’
- and if not, what to replace it with, if anything;
- and 2) whether or not both Friends getting married need to say the same words.

We have approached these 2 questions as a MfW, with pauses between contributions. Responses were as follows :

1)

- 'The full name for Quakers is 'the Religious Society of Friends'. It is essential that the marriage declaration should include one of the current phrases to reflect that. The Society of Friends should not be drawn down the non-Christian route – we must be faithful to our heritage.'
- 'By choosing a religious wedding, the couple wishing to have a Quaker wedding should at least be willing to say the words 'with divine assistance', which has a lighter touch than 'with God's help'.'
- 'We should not dilute the essence of Quakerism.'
- 'If neither one of the couple are members, it is important that the sponsor or the registrar should be weighty Friends.'
- 'Supportive discussion in the lead up to the wedding is important. A meeting for clearness can be offered.'
- 'Sponsorship may be needed to 'spot the Pagan'.'
- 'I prefer 'with divine assistance' over 'with God's help' because the former is ungendered and unpersonalised, and non-patriarchal.'
- 'God' is a concept which is open to wide interpretation, especially among Quakers.'
- 'My husband would not have been able to include the God word in his marriage declaration.'
- 'I like 'divine assistance'. It gives space for those with 'wobbles'.'
- 'I have a problem with 'God'. I describe myself as a 'non-Christian Quaker'. I have no problem with 'with divine assistance'.'
- 'I hang onto my spirituality with my fingertips, and I value the fellowship of our Meeting very much. I am comfortable with 'with divine assistance''
- 'Divine' and 'God' are synonyms. The Religious Society of Friends should stay true to its heritage.'
- 'If we take "God' or divine' out of QFaP, this would put us at odds with Quaker communities in other countries, to whom it is essential.'
- 'Many Quakers have found their spiritual home with Quakers after belonging to other religions whose organised expression of religion is very strong. These Friends come to worship, but they need to feel comfortable.'

"QFaP acknowledges a subset of Quakers who are non-theist. They would be denied a Quaker wedding if either of these forms were mandatory.'

- 'I can accept 'with divine assistance' – but only if I am permitted to interpret this in my own way. I would be sorry if Quakers were to deny a Quaker wedding to, say, a couple who had been faithful Friends of a meeting over many years, bringing their inability- to- believe truthfully to that meeting; finding themselves unable to use either of the forms of words currently set in QFaP; and yet wishing to be married within the loving embrace of the meeting they consider their spiritual home.'

2)

- ‘Those who can’t use either form of words should go to a Registry Office.’
- ‘If one of the couple don’t agree with the wording, they could just say it for the sake of their partner who does want it.’
- ‘We should speak the truth! We should not encourage anyone to just go along with it!’
- ‘Could there be a Quaker welcome to those who choose a Registry Office because they cannot bring themselves to say either phrase? Like welcoming a new child into the meeting?’

*A perspective from BYM Young Friends (aged 18 plus) Minute 2024.05.7 (part)
Marriage: What words do we use?*

The consultation asks two questions: firstly, should there be the option to say neither ‘with God’s help’ nor ‘with divine assistance’; and secondly, whether the option should be allowed for each person in the couple to use different wording.

We discussed these earlier in the weekend, in one of our Special Interest Groups, which has brought us the following report:

The key theme that came through in our conversations is that when you make a declaration upon entering into marriage, you’re being true to your faith, and honest to your partner, and you’re both making this promise to one another with the support of the thing that is most spiritually important to you.

We see it as essential that the declaration includes an element of asking for assistance, a recognition that this monumental promise isn’t something to be kept alone. This could, in practice, be as simple as allowing an option for the declaration to include ‘with assistance’.

We were strongly moved by 22.41 of Quaker Faith and Practice, the first paragraph of which reads “Marriage, says the Christian, is for life; and the wedding is a declaration that it is so. It is a fearsome declaration to make, and without the grace of God, arrogant and absurd...” [Harold Loukes, QF&P 22.41]

We could reluctantly accept the suggested option of making no request for assistance, but only on the basis that it is better than excluding those who cannot use either of the current options truthfully.

However, we much prefer the idea of adding one, or if necessary more, additional options. We suggest the wording “promising, and trusting that this union be held in the light, to be unto [them] a loving and faithful [partner in marriage]”. We also discussed, with less unity, options including ‘in the care of this meeting’, ‘with support from the worshipping community’, and referring to the Spirit.

We felt a clear unity that each partner should be able to differ in the exact wording that they use among these options. We heard that the same words can mean different things to different people, and equally that different words can mean the same thing. The key principle is the notion that each person is being truthful in the promise that they are making, and that this is reciprocated with an equally truthful promise, irrespective of the chosen Quaker wording.

We unite with the report and agree to send this minute as YFGM's response to the consultation, emphasising that as young Friends, this is a matter that affects us, and that this will be a choice that many of us are considering or will be in the future.

We recognise the range of views on this within our own community, including around the degree to which there is a difference between the role of the divine, and the role of the community, in a marriage. We would welcome further consideration of the optional prefixes to the declarations, which address these themes but which also contain wording that can be an obstacle for Friends of differing theologies.

C. Responses from individual Friends

George Breeze, Central England AM

QUESTION: The Revision Committee have a particular query: it is whether the terms of the Quaker Marriage Declaration should require both parties to state that they will be loving and devoted partners with “God’s help” or with “Divine assistance” – as it does at present. This is a very important query and we hope Friends will respond to it.

ANSWER: Marriage before God is a defining aspect of Quakerism: it is more than just a civil ceremony. I feel very strongly about this as a Quaker. Please keep "with God's help". Thank you

Andrew Cheffings – Central England AM

We have been asked about the marriage wording. I think the word 'divine' is more inclusive than 'God' as 'God' has patriarchal connotations. Also there is the whole theological weight of the word 'God' which adds all sorts of meanings which are not very inclusive of non-orthodox Christians and non-Christians. Personally, I prefer something even more neutral than 'divine' as 'divine' has all the connotations of 'divinity' with all the history associated with it. I would prefer something like 'the all encompassing'. But I can live with 'divine' as a compromise.

Anne Ullathorne – Central England AM

I have read the draft chapter on marriage and I think it reads well. Thank you for the effort that friends involved have made. I married in Quaker meeting 50 years ago this September and my mother married in Quaker meeting 32 years before that. Both marriages survived through countless trials as well as joys, because of dependence on the loving Spirit of God to help and nourish. I feel very adamant that our Quaker marriage commitment to be loving and faithful must contain words such as 'with divine assistance' or 'with God's help' or otherwise it has no religious or spiritual significance at all and we are as a civil ceremony. Please do not drop these words or we lose something very precious.

Judith Baker, Abingdon Meeting, Oxford and Swindon Area Meeting.

I was a busy Quaker Registering Officer for ten years. Before and afterwards I was the assistant RO up to the end of last year, so for about 20 years I've been involved with couples considering a Quaker wedding. I've been one of the tutors on training courses and conferences for Registering Officers.

I wrote a paper for my AM exploring both sides of the argument around possibly changing the wording of the Quaker marriage Declarations and have mused for months. Finally, I feel that I have found what I think. Theology versus inclusion.

I think the Declarations should stay as they are. 'We marry none, it is the Lord's work' is our Quaker theology. This also relates to our momentous decision to not

only allow but to promote equal marriage. We are the Religious Society of Friends and we need to reflect that in our marriage Declarations.

Secondly, if the words God and Divine are really so difficult for some people a third option could be offered rather than the rather bleak 'neither of these phrases'. This would take longer to discern as a Yearly Meeting and might be something like 'under the guidance of the Spirit'. This would delay a YM decision on this matter.

Thirdly, see below, people can already have their marriage solemnised in a Register office, with a Quaker meeting for worship later using whatever words they wish.

In my AM we always have a meeting for marriage preparation where, together with a small group of Friends, a couple explores the decision on whether or not a Quaker wedding is right for them.

I didn't keep a tally, but it must be about 90% of my couples who felt that the current Declaration wording suited them. 'Divine' covered most people's experience of that power which is beyond themselves, and which they experience in Meeting, in nature, in music or other ways. We often had deep and profound conversations about the Declarations, what each person understood them to mean and whether Friends would have precise or particular understandings of the words God and Divine.

For the others, it was usually just one of the couple who did not feel that they could say the words with sincerity so, as a couple and with the support of the group, they decided that they would have the legal solemnisation of their marriage in the local Register office, followed immediately or at a later date by a Meeting for Worship.

Such Meetings for Worship were not for the solemnisation of the marriage but for its celebration, with the Quaker certificate amended accordingly. These weddings have not felt in any way less genuine or less Quaker than one in which the solemnisation takes place in the Meeting. They met the need of the couple for their wedding. I can't think of anyone who said that they resented this. This is the normal form of marriage in many other countries; I've been to weddings in France, the US and the Netherlands where the legal and religious parts of the marriage ceremony are separated. It is 'normal'.

I have thought long and hard since attending the Yearly Meeting session which approved the current chapter 16 some years ago. A Friend ministered then that at no other point in our Quaker life together do we ask for any public statement of belief- why in marriage? I think that the answer is in the public nature of a marriage ceremony which makes it different from why someone might choose to sit in Meeting every Sunday or to apply for membership.

I hope the Quaker marriage Declarations stay as they are. Oh, and while I'm at it, please let's not say 'vow'. Keep to Declarations because in a Quaker wedding the couple are declaring to the gathered Friends – not vowing to them. The word 'vow' slips in because it is the norm in the non-Quaker world.

Anonymous responses

Re-your question about with God's help/divine assistance: I would hope we keep something about the religious dimension in our marriage ceremony. There have been times in my 40 year old marriage that I and my spouse have been very grateful for the knowledge of the "third person in the relationship". Times when differences have been too much for one or both of us to solve alone. Also, I think that if we are going to ditch the idea of there being anything in Quakerism beyond ourselves, we might just as well get married in a registry office and have done.

Sarah Deakin, Canterbury LM

Last week I attended a Quaker meeting for business where we deliberated Quaker Marriage.

After the meeting a fellow Quaker contacted me about my ministry and how as a fellow non theist Quaker how they felt unable to disclose their non theist Quakerism to the meeting (!) and how they felt the views of non theists to be important to Quaker marriage . I wanted to share my response to them.

"In the Quaker spirit of equality I'm always baffled that we have those sorts of conversations at all. If non theist Quakers are welcome to meeting then why wouldn't we extend that to Quaker marriage. Personally I think words get in the way and I think people should write their own vows in marriage. I got married in the Australian rainforest with a marriage celebrant and we wrote our own vows with a few bits of legal that we had to include. It felt wonderfully personal and getting married outdoors meant everything to me.

Sometimes I think Quakers get hung up on tradition forgetting that early friends had no such traditions - they met for worship outside for example, something we wouldn't dream of now. Things evolve and I'm pretty sure the maverick George Fox wouldn't set up or recognise the way we run Quakers nowadays. He was a loving compassionate man who would have seen the light in all people regardless of the theism or not -I'm sure."

Thank you for considering this email.

I fully appreciate the work of friends and in particular the difficult role of meeting for suffering. Thank you.

Jean Campbell Leith, North Wales AM

Thank you for opening a consultation about the wording of our Quaker 'marriage vows'; as a non-Theist Friend, I would strongly support a third option, that to 'with divine guidance' and 'with God's help' should be added the option to omit both of these phrases when making our 'promises'.

Rachel Krishnaswami, Cambridgeshire AM

I'm writing with an individual view on the wording of the marriage declaration. (For background, my key Quaker roles are: volunteering with Quaker children and young

people; advocating for loving, inclusive and all-age Quaker communities; and Quaker outreach to wider society.)

Here are my views:

1.) The form of wording most affects those likely to marry in the next 10-15 years. I feel their voices should carry more weight. People with no intention to marry (or to marry again) may have an opinion, but I hope we'll listen to those likely to marry. (The rest of us are just witnesses.)

(a) My 9-year-old daughter believes people should have more choice, rather than less choice, on the wording of their vows.

2.) Omitting the phrase with God/divine could be preferred for many reasons (not just non-theism). It's more inclusive, so should be included as an option.

(a) In wider society, people are asked to swear an oath at critical times. Many Quakers feel that it's part of daily life to rely on divine assistance / God's help. To make a public statement about this fact in a marriage vow reminds me of swearing an oath: it's uttered at a key time, whilst not being required at other times. Simply promising ('let your yea be yea') should suffice.

(b) Feminist theology offers diverse perspectives we may want to be inclusive of. Theology changes flavours and expressions over time; students of theology who marry may perceive this more acutely than most, and prefer flexibility so their vows can feel more timeless. The option of omitting someone else's static phrases may feel more moving to the individuals marrying.

(c) Having an option to not name aloud that which is most precious, can be a very spiritual experience. (I wouldn't want a Quaker wedding if I didn't have the expectation of a spiritual experience.) This can point to, or at least leave room for, experience beyond words.

(d) A view of Quaker scholar Steven Angell on George Fox is that Fox always attempted to speak with the immediacy of the Spirit, and not say the same (key) thing in the same way, twice. (See quote below.) Someone with a similar spiritual temperament may not feel clear (permitted by the Spirit) to utter fixed spiritual language in a Quaker wedding. Of course, such persons could have a civil wedding, followed by a celebratory meeting for worship. However, don't we want these kinds of Friends in the centres of our communities, rather than on the margins?

3.) Quakers recognise the spiritual equality of persons. We can honour this by allowing the Light in each person's conscience to guide each's choice of wording. (If each heeds this Light, it will grow - traditional wisdom.) A declaration of marriage should not impede an individual's spiritual growth.

(a) In reality, many Quakers (young and old) work through personal beliefs (and spiritual language) at different times in their lives. Some may want to leave the wording in a marriage vow more open, to allow for this. Otherwise, uttering a marriage vow could feel like marrying a static formulation of theology. Giving your partner the same freedom feels more realistic and life-giving; it demonstrates spiritual equality (by giving both partners the same spiritual freedom).

(b) It is an unrealistic expectation that two partners in marriage will be at the same spiritual stage (including choice of wording) at the time of marriage. It can be difficult to find any two Quakers in Britain (let alone ones complementary for marriage) at the same spiritual stage, and who prefer the same words. If we acknowledge this diversity, rather than paper it over, perhaps we can live with more integrity and create a more harmonious community.

(c) We don't currently require any Quaker children or young people to conform to the beliefs or wording choices of their parents (for reasons of their well-being); why would we then require exact conformity between two partners in marriage?

4.) Undergoing a Clearness Committee (before marriage) is a much better test of readiness, than agreeing on a form of static language in the marriage declaration. Similarly, if Friends would like more committed members, having candidates undergo a Clearness Committee (before membership) serves a similar function. It would be lamentable if Friends try to use the wording of the marriage declaration to do this kind of work (inreach, testing of readiness) that could be better done in other ways. (Fixed wording can be superficial, whilst a spiritual process is harder to fake.)

5.) Having more complex options for the marriage declaration may confuse the wider public, but our reasons for these can be explained clearly. We should make sure our reasons are sound, rather than insisting that our words have the superficial appearance of being sound (to the public).

6.) In summary, I hope we can agree upon the option to omit static phrases 'through divine assistance' / 'with God's help', in order to accommodate a variety of faithful persons. I hope we can recognise spiritual equality (and support individuals' spiritual growth) by allowing each partner in marriage to use the words that speak most to them (at that time), even if the words differ slightly. Integrity is more important than superficial conformity - our spiritual community needs integrity.

7.) This part about wording is beyond the present enquiry, but I feel it's relevant to MfS

(a) I hope all words in the marriage declaration will have a tone similar to those given in spontaneous vocal ministry by Friends alive today. If words sound archaic, they can also sound formulaic, rather than being moved by the immediacy of the Spirit. Both phrases at the end currently fail the test of sounding as if they were given with the immediacy of the Spirit. (Friends alive today don't sound like

that, when they give spontaneous vocal ministry.) The optional phrases at the beginning likewise sound very formal and ceremonial (how some non-Quakers minister).

(b) As for the option 'so long as we both on earth shall live', I hope 'on earth' can be removed, or be made optional. The phrasing feels awkward and historical (to modern ears). Some astronauts live in orbit around earth, or leave earth's orbit. Theologically, the phrase implies the possibility of continued living elsewhere (whilst not being a faithful spouse). Children, young people, and others of conscience are very aware that our quality of life on earth is decreasing (not increasing) over time, due to ecological harms and rapid climate change. Indulging an escapist theology could (with integrity) be called out; it should not be required. The other option (using 'Lord') does not resonate with some feminist perspectives: ascribing power over life to a masculine-sounding name will not work for all Friends. Therefore we should include the following option, to allow more persons to speak with greater truth and integrity: 'so long as we both shall live'. It is simpler - plain speech.

For reference: Quote from Stephen W Angell about George Fox (25 April, 2007) 'It was Fox's practice never to state the basics of a Christian Quaker faith the same way twice, and this practice arose out of his conviction that true faith must arise out of a vital religious experience. If he were repeating anyone else's words, or even his own words, then that statement of faith would lack the freshness and immediacy that is required for a faith that issues directly from the Holy Spirit.' Source:

<http://hoosierquaker.blogspot.com/2007/04/george-foxs-letter-to-governor-of.html>

Sue Dumpleton, Sheffield Central Meeting

Interesting to read that alternative wording is being considered for Quaker weddings.

The meaning of "with God's help" depends on what one understands "God" to mean. I think quite a few Quakers would consider themselves humanist. Much of God's help comes via humanity.

I wish I could think of some wording that would make it possible for couples who do not want to use the words "divine" or "god" to marry in a Quaker Setting. They would like alternative wording, however I have not as yet worked out what that could be. Has anyone asked those people for their own suggestions for Quakers to consider?

Anne Kurra, Southern East Anglia AM

If I were to remarry again I would not wish to use the phrase with God's help or through divine assistance. God's help is, to my mind, ever present – if I choose to listen or make myself more able to listen, the effort has to be with me to make myself available to receive messages, not with God who is always there helping. Through Divine Assistance is similarly problematic, Divine Assistance is always there for those who are able to take note.

Thinking of nontheist Quakers I imagine they would not want to go against their principles and speak of God or Divine Assistance which implies the existence of a God or Gods. Nontheist Quakers have already been accepted into membership. Quakers believe in equality. I feel nontheists should have an equal right to be married in a Quaker service, and therefore I think they should be able to leave out the phrases referring to God or the Divine, because they cannot say them with honesty and integrity.

Even for Quakers who have no objection to the phrases in question it is possible that the person they wish to marry has some doubts or objections. For the sake of their future happiness I would like the couple to be able to have a Quaker wedding without one party thinking they could be perjuring themselves and possibly going through the motions trying to please their loved one.

Finally it seems to me that most people take a long time to come to feel certain of the existence of God, if indeed they ever do, for it may depend on the personal meaning we ascribe to God. Many Friends are unsure and rely on faith, taking the existence of God on trust. Using the phrase with God's help implies God does exist, likewise the phrase with Divine assistance, so these phrases are problematic.

I have privately discerned the better way is to have the option of leaving these phrases out.

John Lovatt, Almeley Wootton Meeting, Southern Marches AM

I have a suggestion for the marriage service.

The phrase 'through divine assistance' may be replaced by the words 'with God's help' might be replaced with: 'through divine assistance' may be replaced by the words 'with God's help' or 'with the help of the Light Within'.