

MARRIAGE

*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

*Love is the hardest lesson in Christianity;
but, for that reason,
it should be most our care to learn it.*

*Never marry but for love;
but see that thou lovest what is lovely.*
William Penn, 1693

Halifax Friends Meeting

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Commitment and loving care are essential in any healthy relationship. Where there is genuine tenderness, an openness to responsibility, and the seed of commitment, God is surely not shut out. There are many ways of living together where commitment and loving care are essential ingredients. Whether the foundation of a shared home is marriage or not, the essence of good relationships remains the same.

Marriage is a context for a relationship, not a guarantee of its quality. In marriage, a private relationship becomes public and this receives legitimacy, practical support and blessing from the worshipping community. While many people question the institution of marriage, a life-long loving relationship, whether within the framework of marriage, or not, is a cherished ideal. Others find themselves living alone, sometimes by choice, other times by circumstance. All of us, partnered or single, need to feel that we belong, that we are valued and included. We need affirmation and recognition of who and what we are. We need, in our Meeting especially, to make sure that this happens.

As Friends we believe that a committed relationship is best entered into under a sense of Divine leading, with due care to avoid impulsive decisions which later can lead to much hurt. Such relationships are grounded in mutual respect, affection, honesty and commitment. They provide a framework in which spiritual growth can occur.

Marriage is a life-long, living process; it is a vocation and a commitment to be loving and nurturing of one another. The wedding celebration is one specific occasion within that lengthy relationship. Notwithstanding the ideal, divorced persons are welcome to apply for marriage in a Friends' Meeting.

From our earliest days, in the mid seventeenth century, Friends have regarded marriage as a religious, not a mere civil legality. Marriage is a solemn contract made in the presence of God. Early Friends realized the importance of recording marriages which had taken place in Meetings for Worship and requested that the civil authorities recognize these marriages. They fervently maintained, however, that the right joining in marriage is the work of God only; it could not be done by priest, magistrate, or other appointed person, nor is it the act simply of the parties themselves.

Quaker marriages were conducted in Dartmouth in the Quaker whaling community that settled there in the 1780s. In 1972 a bill came before the Nova Scotia House of Assembly permitting the Religious Society of Friends to perform marriages under the Marriage Act.

Most Friends did not question that marriage was between a man and a woman until the 1970s when homosexual and lesbian couples began to request that Meetings publicly recognise their committed relationships. For some Friends this was a difficult journey, but from our belief that there is that of God in every person flows our testimony in the equality of all persons. We believe it is consistent with Friends' history, faith and testimonies to follow a single practice for all those in committed relationships requesting our care, regardless of whether the couples involved are of the same sex or different sexes.

The decision on whether or not to support same-sex marriages in Canadian Yearly Meeting (the national group of Quakers) is taken at the local Meeting level. Halifax Monthly Meeting took that decision in 1994. As a meeting, after much prayerful consideration, it decided to take same-sex marriages under its care and to witness and perform marriages of same-sex couples.

In Friends' procedure, a minute records a decision taken in unity and stands until the Meeting approves a new minute on the same subject. Since then, Halifax Monthly Meeting has taken under its care the marriages of two same-sex couples.

The Religious Society of Friends has established certain procedures for the conduct of a marriage to be solemnized in a Friends' Meeting for Worship. Persons wishing to be married apply to the local congregation (Monthly Meeting) requesting to be married under their care. Usually at least one of the couple is an active participant in the local Quaker community. The Monthly Meeting appoints a committee to visit with the parties, to ascertain that there are no obstacles to the proposed marriage and to ensure that both parties understand the nature of marriage as understood by Friends. If the committee reports that the way seems clear to proceed with the marriage and the Monthly Meeting approves, a Meeting for Worship for Marriage is arranged. During the Meeting for Worship, both parties make their solemn promises. They sign a Certificate of Marriage which is then read to the whole Meeting by a person appointed for this task. At the end of the Meeting for Worship all present are invited to sign the certificate as witnesses. For heterosexual couples who so wish, the provincial marriage certificate may also be completed. Unfortunately at this time, this legal right is extended only to heterosexual couples. It is our belief that changes to legislation in Nova Scotia should be enacted to extend this right to same-sex couples.

Halifax Monthly Meeting calls for a change to the Marriage Act to include same-sex marriage. We support the right of same-sex couples to a civil marriage and to the extension of the legal definition of marriage to include same-sex couples. We also support the right of religious groups and clergy to consent to or refuse to perform same-sex marriages.