

MARRIAGE/JOINING GUIDELINES – approved Eighth Month, 2011

Marriages/Joinings under the Care of Atlanta Friends Meeting

Friends have long recognized that some couples are called into a loving, committed relationship: a ministry of caring. With Divine assistance, this commitment may open the way to deep and unreserved love, to forgiveness, to trust, to spiritual development and nurture of each other's gifts. Early Friends understood that the joining of two people in this covenant relationship “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)

- from SAYMA’s *A Guide to Our Faith and Our Practice*, approved Sixth Month, 2010

The Atlanta Friends Meeting affirms our willingness as a Meeting to hold celebrations of loving commitment under our care. We intend to follow the same customary and careful process of arriving at clearness for any couple who wish to unite under our care, regardless of sexual orientation, when one or both of these partners participate in our community.

We are aware of the diversity of attitudes toward the term “marriage” and leave to the couple the characterization of their relationship – whether a celebration of marriage, commitment or joining.

The Meeting acknowledges the certificate signed by the couple and those present at the ceremony as the witness of Friends to the couple’s spiritual union. Mindful that only heterosexual couples among us have the right [currently in Georgia] to legally sanctioned marriage and its privileges, the Meeting asks Friends, and particularly couples preparing for marriage, to examine how best to respond to bear witness to the inequalities still present in our legal system.

- Minute from Sixth Month, 1990, Atlanta Friends Meeting
-

Introduction and Overview

The information given herein is meant to supplement the couple’s careful reading of the section on marriage among Friends in SAYMA’s *A Guide to Our Faith and Our Practice*. Where differences in these documents exist, the Atlanta Friends Meeting guidelines¹ take precedence.

These guidelines are organized into the following main sections:

- Preparatory Steps for Marriage/Joining
- Clearness Process
- Approval Process
- Marriage/Joining Committee
- After the Marriage/Joining Ceremony

Following the guidelines is an addendum, “*Suggestions for Marriage/Joining under the Care of Atlanta Friends Meeting*”, which is designed to help couples prepare for the actual wedding day.

¹ Paper versions of these and the SAYMA guidelines will be available in the Meetinghouse Library and/or other locations so designated by the Meeting

A Marriage/Joining under the care of the Meeting is more than a single event for a couple; it is an outward affirmation of an inward commitment that has grown between the two individuals and between the Meeting and either or both of these individuals. The clearness process for a marriage/joining is the way in which the couple and the community can examine and reflect on these commitments and follow the Spirit's leadings to make this public affirmation. Just as marriage/joining promises are made for the time going forward, the Meeting, in taking the couple under its care, makes a commitment to support the couple throughout the marriage/joining. Because this act takes place within a community of faith the Meeting expects one or both individuals to be an active participant in the life of the Meeting. The ceremony itself is a called meeting for worship. As with any meeting for worship, it is open to all who wish to attend.

Preparatory Steps for Marriage/Joining

Friends follow the Leading of the Light when coming to clearness on any issue. Particularly when marriage/joining is contemplated, we need to remind ourselves that the Light leads at God's pace. Although it is not possible to set a definitive timeline for clearness, the entire process has usually taken from three to six months. Throughout, Friends need to remember that "the clearness process is complete only when the decision is clear to all."

While the couple may tentatively reserve the meeting room for marriage/joining on a particular date, no formal announcement should be issued or plans made until the following steps have been completed:

- Clearness has been reached by the couple and the Clearness committee (the clearness process).
- Clearness committee gives its recommendation to the Ministry and Worship committee.
- Ministry and Worship approves the marriage/joining.
- The couple is introduced at Meeting for Worship.
- The monthly Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business (Meeting for Business) gives its approval.

Notes:

- *Clearness and Marriage/Joining committees:* The Clearness committee mentioned above is the first of two marriage/joining-related committees described in these guidelines. The second, the Marriage/Joining committee, is formed after the couple's marriage/joining has been approved at Meeting for Business.
- *Promises/vows:* The terms "promises" and "vows" are used interchangeably in these guidelines.
- *Marriage in the manner of Friends:* For a variety of reasons, a couple may wish to be married/joined *in the manner of Friends* rather than *under the care of the Meeting*. Those married/joined "in the manner of Friends" hold their ceremony according to the traditional way Friends worship. This option does *not* entail a clearness process, as the Meeting and the couple are not making any commitment to each other.

Clearness Process

The clearness process is initiated by a letter from the couple to the Ministry and Worship committee, followed by the formation of a Clearness committee and meeting(s) between the couple and the Clearness committee.

Letter to Ministry and Worship

The couple's letter of intent to marry/join should be sent or given to the Ministry and Worship committee. Ministry and Worship will report to the next Meeting for Business that a request has been made by the couple.

Clearness committee

At its next monthly meeting, Ministry and Worship appoints a Clearness committee to meet with the couple. This committee consists of three or four people, of whom at least two are members of Ministry and Worship. A Ministry and Worship member is responsible for convening the committee, keeping the committee mindful of its responsibilities and reporting back to Ministry and Worship. The Clearness committee hopes to be a source of support and loving concern to the couple. The committee also advises them in finalizing their promises/vows for the marriage/joining ceremony.²

Meeting between couple and Clearness committee

The couple's Clearness committee will meet with the couple as many times as necessary to reach clearness. In this process, the couple and the Clearness committee seek to explore the clarity and depth of the couple's relationship with each other and the relationship of the couple with the Meeting.

The following questions, which the couple can consider before meeting with the Clearness committee, are presented as a beginning point for this discussion.

- Why do we wish to be married/joined?
- What are the responsibilities assumed in a marriage/joining?
- What promises do we intend to make to one another?
- Do we know each other's habits, likes and dislikes?
- Do we know each other's opinions on questions important to us?
- Are we ready to make adjustments in our living with kindness and understanding?
- How do we define our "family"? Are there issues about our family(s) which might create conflict in our marriage/joining?
- If relevant, do we want to have children? Have we discussed the timing, cost, values and beliefs involved in raising children?
- What interests and activities do we enjoy sharing?
- Do we know each other's attitudes on earning, spending, and saving?
- How do we feel about each other's economic, religious, and cultural backgrounds?
- How do we react to each other's parents, friends, and relatives?
- Do we feel comfortable communicating with each other about our sexual needs and desires?
- Are we able to communicate about each other's strengths, weaknesses, joys and sorrows?
- Do we struggle against any desire to change or control one another?
- Do we know each other well enough to consider frankly the above questions?
- Why are we asking to be married/joined under the care of the meeting?
- What is the importance of having a called Meeting for Worship for Marriage/Joining?
- What is our relationship with the Meeting?
- What support do we expect from the Meeting?

² The Meeting guidelines related to **vows/promises** differ slightly from those found in SAYMA's *A Guide to Our Faith and Our Practice*.

Meeting of Clearness committee

After meeting(s) with the couple, the Clearness committee meets without the couple to assure themselves of their clearness about the couple's marriage/joining. The committee also finalizes its recommendation on the couple's promises.

Approval Process

The Clearness committee reports back to Ministry and Worship recommending either 1) that the couple's marriage/joining be taken under the care of the Meeting and that their promises have been approved by the committee or 2) that the couple's marriage/joining *not* be taken under the care of the Meeting.

Approval by Ministry and Worship

Ministry and Worship meets to consider the report of the Clearness committee. If Ministry and Worship approves the marriage/joining, a minute is prepared recommending that the couple's marriage/joining be taken under the care of the Meeting. If Ministry and Worship discerns that the couple's marriage/joining not be taken under the care of the Meeting, a minute with that recommendation is prepared.

Introduction of couple at Meeting

Twice during the time between the Ministry and Worship report of the request and the approval of the marriage/joining at Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business, the couple is introduced at the rise of Meeting for Worship and Friends are invited to get to know them as a couple. Any Friend who feels a concern in support of or against the marriage/joining should raise this with the couple and/or the Clearness committee.

Approval by the Meeting

At a Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business, the minute from Ministry and Worship is considered. If the Meeting approves that the marriage/joining take place under the care of the Meeting, Ministry and Worship recommends formation of a Marriage/Joining committee.

Marriage/Joining Committee

Once the Meeting for Business has approved the marriage/joining under its care, Ministry and Worship will recommend a Marriage/Joining committee for the approval of the Meeting for Business. While Ministry and Worship consults with the couple about the desired membership of the committee, the Meeting may recommend and approve other Friends to this committee. At least one member of Ministry and Worship shall serve on the Marriage/Joining committee.

Note: If the marriage/joining has not taken place six months following approval by the Meeting for Business, the Clearness committee will review the couple's situation and report to Ministry and Worship. If Ministry and Worship cannot recommend the couple's marriage/joining under the care of the meeting, it will meet with the couple to communicate the reason for this decision. Based on the circumstances, Ministry and Worship will discuss ways that the Meeting can assist the couple.

The Marriage/Joining committee advises the couple in finalizing the documentation of the couple's promises and in planning a ceremony in harmony with Friends' practices and testimonies. For details, see the Addendum, "Suggestions for Marriage/Joining under the Care of Atlanta Friends Meeting". They

help ensure that the details of the actual marriage/joining are faithfully carried out, including the preparation and signing of the certificate marriage/joining.

If the couple has a license³ to legalize the marriage/joining, the license is signed by the couple and by the Clerk or another officer of the Meeting who attended the marriage/joining, on behalf of all other witnesses. If an officer of the Meeting is unable to attend, then the Clerk of the Marriage/Joining committee may sign on their behalf.

After the Marriage/Joining Ceremony

After the marriage/joining, the Marriage/Joining committee reports on the ceremony at the next Meeting for Business including minuting the promises made by the couple.

In taking the couple under its care, the Meeting shows its support and concern for the couple in their lives together. Celebrating anniversaries, births of children and other milestones in the couple's life is one manifestation of this care.

Also, the Meeting can support the couple when struggles and sorrows come in to their lives. This can be done through the clearness process whether initiated by either or both of the couple or by the Meeting. Should the couple move out of the area of the Atlanta Meeting, the support can continue. Ministry and Worship can help the couple find another Friends Meeting and ask them that Meeting to assume loving care of the couple's union.

Questions

Anyone with questions about marriage/joining under the care of Atlanta Friends Meeting is encouraged to talk with a member of the Ministry and Worship committee.

³ Regarding **licenses**, in SAYMA's *A Guide to Our Faith and Our Practice*, the section on Marriage Among Friends states that "...it is the couple's responsibility to secure the license. The wedding planning committee will arrange to have it signed after the meeting for worship for marriage, and the couple will then file it."

Addendum

Suggestions for Marriage/Joining under the Care of Atlanta Friends Meeting

The thoughts and suggestions expressed in this section are drawn from the experience of Friends who have been married under the care of a meeting, Friends who have served on a Clearness or Marriage/Joining committee, and Friends who have been active in the Atlanta Meeting.

The suggested steps listed below are considered primarily the responsibility of the couple, rather than the Marriage/Joining committee or others in the Atlanta Meeting. The goal is to help couples plan a wedding which does not become a burden for anyone. We seek to help the couple and the Marriage/Joining committee maintain the sacredness of the occasion while celebrating the joyfulness of the event.

Wedding Day Preparations

Once approval for the marriage/joining has been given at a Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business, formal preparations for the wedding day can begin.

Things to do well ahead of the wedding day

1. The couple should choose four or more people to serve as a Marriage/Joining committee, at least two of whom should be active in the Atlanta Friends Meeting. This committee will help with all aspects of the preparations before and during the wedding. They will also be available to the couple for questions, support and nurture. Friends who have served on a Marriage/Joining committee in the past will be glad to offer help to those who are new on a Marriage/Joining committee. Contact Ministry and Worship for names.
2. Allow time to obtain a license. State law requires this.
3. Appoint a member of the Marriage/Joining committee to say a few words of welcome and explanation at the beginning of the Marriage/Joining Meeting for those who may be unfamiliar with Friends' Meeting for Worship.
4. Decide on the facilities both for the wedding and for a reception (if desired). If the Meetinghouse is used, decide on several people who will help before and after in setting up furniture and cleaning up afterwards.
5. Clear the date for the wedding and rehearsal with the Meeting's Office Coordinator if the Meetinghouse is to be used.
6. Arrange to have a Certificate of Marriage/Joining drawn up. Suggested wording is in SAYMA's *A Guide to Our Faith and Our Practice*. Other vows may be spoken as long as they are in the same spirit as the words used on the Certificate. The couple should have consulted with their Clearness committee on their vows before the clearness process was completed.
7. If a reception is planned, appoint a person to be in charge. If it is at the Meetinghouse, have at least one person from the Meeting who is familiar with the kitchen. Give phone numbers of those on this committee to each other for better planning.
8. In planning a reception, keep in mind Friends' attitude of moderation in the use of alcohol.
9. Decide upon any special plans such as for music, readings, flowers, photos and other special touches. Many Friends feel that picture taking during the ceremony is not in keeping with the spirit of Worship, but is appropriate afterwards formally or informally.

10. Appoint two people to be responsible for the certificate on the day of the Wedding to bring it to the couple after they have made their promise to each other, and to be there to help guests sign it after the close of the Meeting.
11. Arrange for weights to hold the certificate in place during signing by the couple and later the guests.
12. Appoint several ushers familiar with Friends Meetings and the facility. If it is to be a large gathering of friends and family, ushers should be prepared to assist with the parking situation. Only one side of West Howard Avenue may be used; a permit from the City of Decatur is needed for days other than Sunday. Parking at a distance may need to be planned.
13. Arrange for out of town guests' hospitality.

A week or two before the wedding

1. Decide on a table to be used for you to sign the certificate during the ceremony and for guests to sign on afterwards. Some couples have the table with the certificate brought to them after they have made their vows and it is quietly taken back to its place and the certificate is handed to the person previously designated to read it. Other couples have the certificate in front of them from the start, and it remains there until the close of Meeting.
2. Lightly pencil in names of any relatives, attendants, Marriage/Joining committee members, and others whom the couple wishes to sign at the top of the list of guests. The couple may prefer to have no special designations.
3. If the Meetinghouse is used, any deliveries of flowers, food, etc., should be made either during office hours or during the times of the scheduled building use.
4. Get two or three pens with indelible ink for you (and later the guests) to sign the Certificate with. Decide who will have them for you during the wedding.
5. Think about how you will enter the room, where you would like family to sit, and how to arrange the room (or benches outside). Consider facing as many people as possible.
6. Decide who will close the Marriage/Joining Meeting, yourselves or one of your Marriage/Joining committee members.

Rehearsal – usually a day before the wedding

1. Meet with Marriage/Joining committee members, close family, and ushers at the facility to walk through the procedure. This is especially important for those not familiar with Quaker unprogrammed Worship.
2. Arrange furniture, both for the Wedding and reception.
3. Double check on pens, certificates, and license.

The Wedding Day

1. Ushers arrive in plenty of time to greet family and friends and help them be seated.
2. The couple may be already seated or may come in at the appointed time – with or without parents and attendants.
3. As the couple and friends settle, the appointed person stands to give a word of welcome and explanation of Worship and the certificate.
4. As Worship begins, the couple should take time to look at those who have come, center themselves, quiet their thoughts, and reflect on the promise which each is about to make. Do not rush this time. Many couples find they need at least 15-20 minutes.

5. When both feel ready, the couple should stand and face one another to say their vows. They may exchange rings at this time.
 6. The certificate is usually brought to the couple (or is in place before them) and each signs his or her marriage/joining signature.
 7. The certificate is read aloud, either following the vows or at the close of worship.
 8. Worship continues and guests may wish to speak out of the silence.
 9. The couple or designated person closes Meeting when they sense the time is right, allowing ample opportunity for leadings of the Spirit. This may be done by a hand shake.
 10. The couple may wish to leave the room first while one of the Marriage/Joining committee members announces the receiving line, reminds friends to sign the certificate, and mentions other details about the reception.
 11. If the couple has a license to legalize the marriage/joining, the license is signed by the couple and by the Clerk or another officer of the Meeting who attended the marriage/joining, on behalf of all other witnesses. If an officer of the Meeting is unable to attend, then the Clerk of the Marriage/Joining committee may sign on their behalf. Once signed, the couple is responsible for filling it.⁴
-

⁴ As stated in the section on Marriage Among Friends in SAYMA's *A Guide to Our Faith and Our Practice*, "...it is the couple's responsibility to secure the **license**. The marriage planning committee will arrange to have it signed after meeting for worship for marriage, and the couple will then file it."