



We are but witnesses

Marriage equality and the decision of Britain
Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of
Friends to recognise same sex marriages

Introduction

This paper is offered to our partner churches in England, Scotland and Wales who are in membership of *Churches Together in Britain and Ireland* and to our partner faith groups in the *Inter Faith Network UK*. We also hope that our Quaker Meetings in Britain will share it with their local Churches Together Groups and Inter Faith Forums.

During our Yearly Meeting in the University of York in July 2009, we British Quakers reached new clarity about same sex marriage and we wish to share with you the spiritual processes by which we were led to such an important development in our life together. Our decision was to make the same arrangements for same sex couples in our Meetings as are already in place for opposite sex couples, and that we shall also be seeking to change the law. British Quakers have been learning that our Christian community should now celebrate and give full recognition to the committed gay and lesbian relationships that are so clearly visible among us in our local Meetings.

We invite our church and faith partners to enter into dialogue with us about this change by writing to our *Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations* c/o the Secretary: Marigold Bentley, QCCIR, c/o Friends House, 173 Euston Road, London, NW1 2BJ.

A Spiritual Discernment

We begin by sharing with you the way in which we Quakers make our decisions. In considering our business, we meet in

gathered silence and the stillness of worship. We do not vote; we listen and wait in the Light to discern together God's will for us today.¹

Quaker discernment is experiential and mystical and at its core is our commitment to follow the leadings of the spirit of Christ in practice as well as in theory. We have learned that God may speak through any of God's people; but also that only in gathered worship are we able to discern what the Spirit is saying to our community and how to act on this voice.² We believe that in following this practice we are continuing a tradition that began with the early Church.³

In York this summer, 1700 Friends gathered for our week-long residential gathering. Among other matters, we were there to give further consideration to our continued concern to celebrate committed relationships. For this concern, we provided ourselves with four main sessions for what we call 'threshing' – looking deeply into our understanding of an issue before us. All the sessions were attended by well over 1,000 Friends. First, we were reminded of the history and the issues surrounding this concern. Second, we heard four deeply moving presentations from Friends who shared their personal experience of opposite sex and of same sex relationships. Third, in small groups we considered what we have learned from our long experience of relationships in our practice among British Friends and considered what the Bible and other writings have to tell us. Finally, we held two deeply gathered sessions in which first we 'threshed' our concern, seeking corporate discernment for a way forward. It was during the course of these sessions

that the Meeting decisively moved from the experience of 'threshing' to a true sense of leading.

The Leading

British Quakers felt led to commit themselves to a major change in our marriage procedures; same sex couples will in future be treated equally with opposite sex couples. In session we agreed a long Minute of which this is part:

...we are being led to treat same sex committed relationships in the same way as opposite sex marriages, reaffirming our central insight that marriage is the Lord's work and we are but witnesses. The question of legal recognition by the state is secondary.⁴

The background

For many years before now, the Society has been prayerfully considering same sex relationships. In 1963, the booklet *Towards a Quaker view of sex* stated, in a passage that was included in our 1995 book of discipline, 'It is the nature and quality of a relationship that matters... the same criteria seem to us to apply whether a relationship is heterosexual or homosexual.'⁵ In 1988 Meeting for Sufferings, then the national executive body of British Quakers, recognised same sex relationships and suggested that individual Meetings might celebrate them.

Following the 2003 Civil Partnership Act, which permitted the civil registration of same sex relationships

granting legal parity with marriage, many Friends began to express unease that the ability of Quakers to recognise marriage in a religious context was now explicitly excluded from the terms of civil partnership. The issue was considered at various levels of our Yearly Meeting over the next several years, and in 2008 Meeting for Sufferings recommended that the Yearly Meeting should 'consider how we should celebrate and recognise committed relationships within our Quaker community and what revisions to *Quaker faith and practice* would follow from this to include same sex partnerships'.

After consulting all British Meetings in 2007 the group appointed to review current opinion reported:

There is overwhelming evidence that attitudes have changed significantly in recent years, even since our current book of discipline was published in 1995.⁶

When the issue came to the Yearly Meeting in 2009 a report of the proceedings in *The Friend* said:

What was striking... was the sheer constancy of opinion expressed in favour of using the word 'marriage' and of starting the process of seeking a change in the law. And the reason given was consistently the same, that marriage is the Lord's work and the Lord is clearly marrying gay couples. All we have to do is to recognise it.⁷

The session heard many Friends who spoke of their direct experience in the life of our Quaker Meetings that the gift of

marriage is already being given to same sex couples they know as well as opposite sex couples, leading us to a profound compulsion to act now.

Marriage after the manner of Friends

In 1669, one of our most influential early Friends, George Fox, described the Quaker understanding of 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.⁸

In the Quaker understanding, the couple marry each other in the sight of God and witnessed by the Meeting. No intermediary performs the ceremony or pronounces the couple to be married. This acknowledges that the process of becoming 'one flesh' cannot be created by any outside agency. Neither can it be prevented by anyone. The Lord brings the couple into unity. We onlookers can only recognise and celebrate that this has happened. Our procedures for marriage 'within the care of the meeting' are noted from 1688 onwards⁹ and reported to the state by Quaker registering officers from 1753.¹⁰ Our 1995 book of discipline is clear that marriage after the manner of Friends is '*not a mere civil contract but a religious act.*'¹¹

Testing the leading

Quakers, historically, have been shaped by our personal and corporate spiritual experience, a framework which has been tested against the Bible and our testimonies - to truth and peace, equality and simplicity among others. Together these have provided the framework for our beliefs and practices. For Quakers, revelation has not been closed in the finalising of the biblical text; continuing inspiration has always been an additional source of authority. It has always been recognised that a supposed inspiration that was contradictory to Scripture might in fact be a delusion. It is therefore reasonable to test this leading against Scripture, remembering that Quakers have always acknowledged that in addition to the literal historical meaning, Scripture has also 'a deeper, spiritual meaning... that would be illuminated by the Spirit.'¹² As another early Friend Isaac Penington explained:

And the end of words is to bring men to the knowledge of things beyond what words can utter. So, learn of the Lord to make a right use of the Scriptures: which is by esteeming them in their right place, and prizing that above them that is above them.

In this light, we do not seek for proof texts to either confirm or deny our leading. Rather, we seek to read Scripture in the Spirit that inspired it.

We should be clear that the Bible does not discuss same sex marriage since it is assumed within the Biblical world-view that marriage is between men and women. But equally

the Bible assumes the existence of slavery and of polygamy, neither of which would today be regarded as normative by Christians or Jews.¹³

Scripture has been cited in opposition to same sex marriage: first, as condemning same sex relationships; second, as ruling out the possibility that 'marriage' can be understood as applying to same sex couples. As regards the condemnation of same sex relationships, the key texts are Genesis 19, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1:26-27, and 1 Corinthians 6:9-10.¹⁴ It seems clear to us that none of these prohibit same sex relationships *per se*. Rather, they either assume heterosexual marriage, condemn the abuse of power exhibited in particular same sex relationships or incorporate homosexuality within a purity code that is not generally regarded as binding.¹⁵

With respect to the claim that Scripture requires marriage to involve opposite sex couples, we note Gen. 2:24, Mk., 10:2-9, and Eph. 5-22-33. In each case we do not find that the passage argues for heterosexual marriage but assumes opposite sex marriage. In each case the import of the passage has to do with the community revealed in marriage.¹⁶

While we recognise that the biblical authors may have been worried by behaviour that challenges the norm of heterosexuality, we remember that Paul writes: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ.' (Gal. 3:28) The first Christians like us experienced the power of Christ's Spirit to bring about new forms of community

that overcame existing inequalities and hierarchical divisions.¹⁷

Sharing our leading

Now that British Quakers have committed themselves to this change, we wish to share that news with our friends among other traditions of religious life.

We are aware that this decision may seem very radical given the strength of tradition that lies behind current marriage practice. We are also aware that our friends in other denominations and faith groups might ask whether we should implement our sense of the leading by the Spirit until discussions elsewhere are concluded. For us, however, this has been a powerful leading and a compelling experience of the Spirit and the Yearly Meeting felt quite clear that now was the time to decide. Our Minute included these words:

We will need to explain our decision to other Christian bodies, other faith communities, and, indeed to other Yearly Meetings, and pray for a continuing loving dialogue, even with those who might disagree strongly with what we affirm as our discernment of God's will for us at this time.

Following our leading – the next stage

Our intention now is to formalize our arrangements to enable local Quaker meetings to recognize, celebrate, record and report same sex marriages for Quakers and those

associated with us, just as we provide celebration of heterosexual marriage. We will seek to change the law. We will not provide this for non-Quakers, and we are not wishing to tell other churches or faith groups that they should do what we are doing. Further, this is a decision of British Friends, not of the worldwide Quaker community who will follow their own discernments. We need to prepare changes to our Book of Discipline to reflect our discernment and Friends are already working to implement these decisions. Minute 23 of our Yearly Meeting says:

We therefore ask Meeting for Sufferings to take steps to put this leading into practice and to arrange for a draft revision of the relevant sections of *Quaker faith & practice*, so that same sex marriages can be prepared, celebrated, witnessed, recorded and reported to the state, as opposite sex marriages are. We also ask Meeting for Sufferings to engage with our governments to seek a change in the relevant laws so that same sex marriages notified in this way can be recognised as legally valid, without further process, in the same way as opposite sex marriages celebrated in our meetings. We will not at this time require our registering officers to act contrary to the law, but understand that the law does not preclude them from playing a central role in the celebration and recording of same sex marriages.

Finally

Two hundred years ago, an earlier generation had yet to learn that the practice of slavery was an injustice to our fellow human beings. Today we are amazed that they did not recognise this until visionaries showed them that it was so. We believe that two hundred years from now, those who follow us will be equally astounded to discover that in the twenty-first century we had still to realise the full equality of lesbian and gay people.

‘You will say,’ George Fox is reported as declaring in 1652, ‘Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of Light and hast walked in the Light, and what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God?’¹⁸

Notes

The title *We are but witnesses* is taken from the writings of George Fox – see note 8 below.

- 1 Quaker Meetings for Worship for Business are described in *Quaker faith & Practice*, 1995, chapter 3 (and chapter 2). A full treatment can be found in, e.g., Sheeran, Michael J. , 1983, *Beyond majority rule: voteless decisions in the Religious Society of Friends*, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends.
- 2 Cf. 1 Cor. 2:10, 14–16; 14:29. See also: Palmer, Parker J. , 2007, *The courage to teach guide for reflection and renewal*, Parker J. Palmer with Megan Scribner, 10th anniversary ed., San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, p. 127.
- 3 Cf. Rom. 12:2, 1 Cor. 12:10, 1 John 4:1, Eph. 1:18.
- 4 Britain Yearly Meeting (Society of Friends), Meeting (2009: York, England), *Minute 23*, 31 July 2009.
- 5 *Towards a Quaker view of sex*, by a group of Friends, 1963, p. 38–39.
- 6 *Quaker faith & practice*, §22.15.

- 7 Loverance, Rowena, 2009, 'Equality for same-sex marriage: how did we do it?', *The Friend*, 7 August.
- 8 Fox, George [1624–1691], 1698, *A collection of select and Christian epistles*, London: printed and sold by T. Sowle, p. 281. Quoted in *Quaker faith & practice*, 16.01.
- 9 *Quaker faith & practice*, §19.56.
- 10 Great Britain, Marriage Act, 1753.
- 11 *Quaker faith & practice*, §16.05.
- 12 Lisa Sowle Cahill, 1998, *Sex, gender, and Christian ethics*, Cambridge.
- 13 Further consideration of the biblical texts is available from: Heacock, Anthony, 2009, *Jonathan loved David: manly love in the Bible and the hermeneutics of sex*, Sheffield: Phoenix Press.
- 14 Cf. Isaiah 1, 3; Jer.; Ezekiel; Zeph.; Judges 19; Matt. 10
- 15 And cf. Peter's recognition that all foods are made clean.
- 16 A fuller paper exploring the biblical material, *British Quakers and same-sex marriage* by Rachel Muers, is now available from QCCIR c/o Friends House (address below).
- 17 1 Corinthians chapter 3 for example.
- 18 *Quaker faith & practice*, §19.07.

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