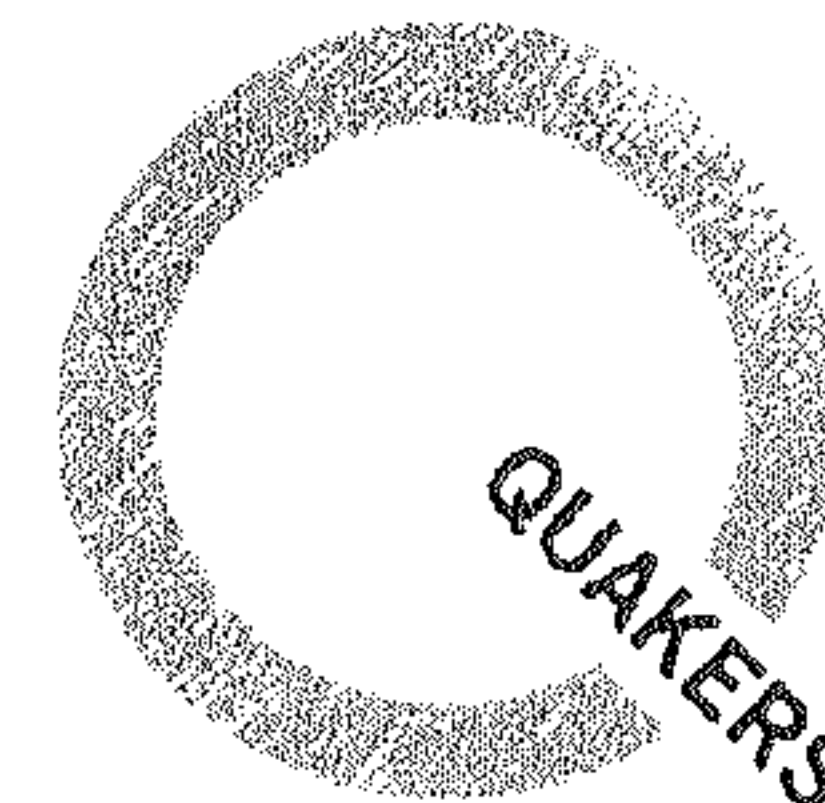


News Release



31 July 2009

Quakers consider committed relationships

Quakers in Britain today concluded a long and profound process of discernment about the way forward for Quaker marriage and approach to same sex partnerships.

The minute recording their decision is as follows:

Minute 25 Britain Yearly Meeting 31 July 2009

Further to minute 17, (attached) a session was held on Tuesday afternoon at which speakers shared personal experiences of the celebration and recognition of their committed relationships. These Friends had felt upheld by their meetings in these relationships but regretted that whereas there was a clear, visible path to celebration and recognition for opposite sex couples, the options available for couples of the same sex were not clear and could vary widely between meetings. Friends who feel theirs to be an ordinary and private rather than an exotic and public relationship have had to be visible pioneers to get their relationship acknowledged and recorded.

This open sharing of personal experience has moved us and added to our clear sense that, 22 years after the prospect was first raised at Meeting for Sufferings 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.

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 and 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.

We have heard dissenting voices during the threshing process which has led to us this decision, and we have been reminded of the need for tenderness to those who are not with us who will find this change difficult. We also need to remember, including in our revision of *Quaker faith and practice*, those Friends who live singly, whether or not by choice.

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 the decision, Martin Ward, clerk of Quakers Yearly Meeting said: "This minute is the result of a long period of consultation and what we call "threshing" in our local meetings, culminating in two gathered sessions of our Yearly Meeting. At these sessions, according to practice, we heard ministry arising out of silent worship which led us to discern the will of God for the Religious Society and record it in this minute."

Ends

Media Information

Anne van Staveren

0207 663 1048

07958 009703

annev@quaker.org.uk

www.quaker.org.uk

For interviews and photographs during Yearly Meeting Gathering contact Anne van Staveren on 07958 009703. Media attendance is limited. The business sessions of Yearly Meeting Gathering are not open to the media. A background paper on Quakers and committed partnerships is available from annev@quaker.org.uk

Notes to the Editor:

- Quakers are known formally as The Religious Society of Friends.
- Quakers were given the right to conduct marriages in England and Wales in 1753, but case law before that recognised the validity of Quaker marriages.
- Quakers began to call for a sexual morality based on the worth of relationships in 1963 with the publication of '*Towards a Quaker view of Sex*'. Since then, Quakers have developed through tolerance to widespread acceptance of same sex partnerships, particularly since the formation of the now Quaker Lesbian and Gay Fellowship in 1973. Meeting for Sufferings minuted appreciation of gay and lesbian Quakers' contribution in 1988.
- There was no formal stage of 'recognising' same sex partnerships nationally as Quaker procedures allowed it to happen: there was nothing against it. The first meetings for commitment were in 1996. Since then, around twenty local meetings have celebrated same sex relationships through an official meeting for commitment.
- Following the Civil Partnership Act of December 2005, same sex couples in England, Wales and Scotland, who share Quaker beliefs may opt for a blessing or commitment ceremony after entering a civil partnership.
- The Civil Partnership Act allows same sex partnerships to be registered as civil partnerships in law, but such registrations cannot take place in the context of religious worship. Civil partnership is not recognised as marriage, although registered civil partners share almost the same legal rights and responsibilities as heterosexual couples.
- The total number of civil partnerships formed in the UK since the Civil Partnership Act came in December 2005 is 26,787. (*Office for National Statistics*)
- *Minute 17 reads:*

YEARLY MEETING

OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS (QUAKERS) IN BRITAIN

AT THE YEARLY MEETING

HELD IN YORK DURING THE YEARLY MEETING GATHERING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF YORK

25 July – 1 August 2009

Minute 17: Committed relationships: introduction

The report 'Exploring our attitudes to committed partnerships' (pages 61-64 of *Documents in advance*) has been introduced to us through a personal account of one Friend's experience of the varied committed relationships in his family and his Quaker community.

We receive minute S/08/11/3 of Meeting for Sufferings held 1 November 2008 on the recognition of partnerships under the auspices of Britain Yearly Meeting. In the light of our testimony to equality we are asked by Meeting for Sufferings to consider how we should celebrate and recognise committed relationships within our Quaker community and what revisions of *Quaker faith & practice* would follow from this to include same sex partnerships.

We have opportunity at an open session on Tuesday afternoon to hear speakers who will share their personal experiences of commitment, to be followed by response groups, and, on Wednesday evening, special interest groups. We will return to this matter on Thursday afternoon, and to the two requests which Meeting for Sufferings has put to us to:

- i) Endorse the conclusions of the Quaker Life minute that it would not be right at this time either to lobby government for further changes in the law on committed partnerships nor to surrender our legal authority to conduct heterosexual marriages;
- ii) Explore the issue and give broad guidance on how changes suggested in the Quaker life minute might be expressed in chapter 16 of *Quaker faith & practice*.