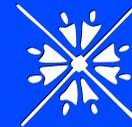


This document was prepared by the Working Party on Spirituality and Sexual Ethics, which served on behalf of the Ministry and Counsel committee of New England Yearly Meeting of Friends (Quaker). The report consists of the Working Party members' personal reflections, arising out of their joint exploration and consultation among New England Friends on this topic. The views expressed are those of its authors and do not necessarily reflect the attitudes of New England Yearly Meeting Ministry and Counsel, New England Yearly Meeting, or the Society of Friends.

In publishing Faithful Sexuality, Ministry and Counsel acknowledges its appreciation for the candid considerations and expressions of the working party members in their eight years of service and a hope that their report will encourage meaningful discussion and further awareness of intimacy and spirituality in a rapidly changing world.

# FAITHFUL SEXUALITY



The Report of the Working Party on  
Spirituality and Sexual Ethics  
to Ministry & Counsel of  
New England Yearly Meeting

# **Faithful Sexuality**

The Report of the Working Party  
on Spirituality and Sexual Ethics

New England Yearly Meeting

Ministry & Counsel

August, 2016

### **About This Publication...**

This document was prepared by the Working Party on Spirituality and Sexual Ethics which served on behalf of the Ministry and Counsel committee of New England Yearly Meeting of Friends (Quaker). The report consists of the Working Party members' personal reflections, arising out of their joint exploration, and consultation among New England Friends on this topic. The views expressed are those of its authors and do not necessarily reflect the attitudes of New England Yearly Meeting Ministry and Counsel, New England Yearly Meeting, or the Society of Friends.

In publishing *Faithful Sexuality*, Ministry and Counsel acknowledges its appreciation for the candid considerations and expressions of the working party members in their eight years of service and a hope that their report will encourage meaningful discussion and further awareness of intimacy and spirituality in a rapidly changing world.

Unless noted otherwise, the contents of this publication are published under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share-Alike 3.0 license.

New England Yearly Meeting Ministry & Counsel  
Worcester, Massachusetts  
August 2016

## Table of Contents

<i>About Faithful Sexuality</i> .....	1
Basic Principles.....	1
Sex is Sacred.....	3
Love.....	4
Honesty.....	5
Equality, Freedom, and Power.....	6
Including Everyone.....	8
Integrity.....	10
Community.....	11
<i>Loving Our Bodies</i> .....	12
Reclaiming the Body.....	12
Playfulness and Fantasy.....	13
Shame.....	14
Neediness.....	15
Physical Closeness and Touch.....	15
Nakedness and Dress.....	17
Masturbation.....	17
Sexual Media (Pornography and Erotica).....	18
Sexual Addiction.....	20
<i>Relationships Across The Lifespan</i> .....	21
The Decision to Have Children.....	23
Sexuality in Childhood.....	23
Child Safety.....	24
Adolescence.....	26
Sex and Singles.....	28
Choices in Unplanned Pregnancy.....	29
Marriage and Committed Relationships.....	31
Sex within Couple Relationships.....	34
Monogamy.....	36
Divorce.....	36
New Relationships and Remarriage.....	37

Later Life.....	38
<i>The Meeting Community</i> .....	40
Care of the Meeting Community.....	40
Forgiveness and Healing.....	41
Ourselves and Our Community.....	44
<i>Appendices</i> .....	46
Appendix 1: NEYM Minute of Commitment, August 2007.....	46
Appendix 2: Monthly Meeting and Young Adult Friends' Minutes on Spirituality and Sexual Ethics....	48
Appendix 3: Suggestions for Discussion Groups on Spirituality and Sexual Ethics.....	61
Appendix 4: Bibliography and Resources for Further Study.....	67

## ***About Faithful Sexuality***

Our group—the New England Yearly Meeting (NEYM) Ministry and Counsel Committee's Working Party on Spirituality and Sexual Ethics—met from 2008 to 2015. We first came together in response to promptings at Yearly Meeting Sessions. In 2007, NEYM approved a Minute of Commitment to “articulate our sexual ethics and the spirituality of sex.” For several years, the Young Adult Friends had also been making calls for New England Friends to overcome our hesitancy to talk about sex and to deal with it openly. They were asking for guidance around a lot of questions, including “What defines a positive and spiritual sexual relationship?” (2005 NEYM Minutes, YAF Minute 2005-13, p. 41)

The working party began by encouraging monthly and quarterly meetings to take up this discernment process. We wrote to clerks, offered models for the corporate discernment process that included guidelines for confidentiality, and offered to serve as facilitators. Several monthly meetings took up the challenge and drafted minutes. Throughout that process, we were doing the same kind of discernment ourselves, and when it seemed that this initial work with monthly meetings had run its course, our own process of discernment became our primary focus.

### **Basic Principles**

We have spent eight years as a Working Party, worshipping together, separately, and with other gatherings of Friends, reflecting deeply on our struggles to lead Spirit-led, ethical lives as sexual women and men. We have examined our lives in the Light of Truth and, to the best of our ability, drawn lessons from what we have seen and experienced. Our group has included gay,

straight, single, married, divorced, childless, and parents.

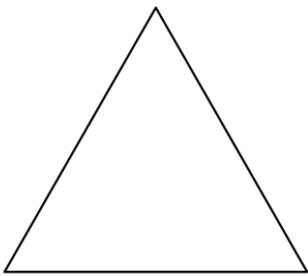
What you hold in your hands is the product of several years of deep, prayerful spiritual discernment about our sexuality. Our hope in writing it is that by embarking on this journey ourselves and sharing what we experience, we may encourage others to take up the same questions. We hope to catalyze an ongoing discernment process among Friends concerning a part of our lives that is central to our spiritual journey, a topic that is at once very intimate and thoroughly intertwined with our communities.

The fundamental principles of Quaker sexual ethics are the same as Quaker ethics in any other area of life: Seek that of God in oneself and in others, recognizing that all of us have the capacity for good and evil. Hold oneself and one's motives in the Light, and pray for guidance and courage to follow God's lead. Consider the consequences of one's actions on others—children, families, the meeting, and the wider community. When seeing that one has done harm, face that truth and take responsibility for the harm done, apologize to those who have been hurt, make whatever amends are possible, and then change one's behavior.

Some of us have difficulty with the word "ethics" because it conjures up a rigid rulebook. We resonate deeply with proposed language for the revised *Faith and Practice of New England Yearly Meeting*, which says, "No definitive or exhaustive list of 'Quaker testimonies' can be made. The temptation is that such a list might be treated as outward standards to which Friends are required to subscribe, shifting the source of authority from a living encounter with the Spirit of Truth to a quasi-creedal code of expected behavior." (<http://neym.org/fp-revision>) It's easy to see ourselves on a continuum, pulled in one direction towards orthodoxy and a clear moral code, and in the other towards the freedom to do whatever feels right

in the moment. One of the insights to come out of our working party was a different model— a picture, actually — of how Quaker discernment fits in relation to these two extremes, leaning toward neither and, to a certain extent, standing in opposition to both:

Listen for the promptings of Spirit.



Obey the rules.

Do what you like.

Faithfulness in sexual relationships means first being faithful to God. In seeking to be faithful, whether as individuals, as couples, or corporately within our communities, we are trying to listen for and to follow the promptings of Spirit in all things. In doing this discernment, each of us draws heavily on our own experiences. We also look at the experiences of those around us, and look to traditions (our Quaker tradition as well as others, both religious and secular), and try to stay grounded in the wisdom of our bodies in harmony with the Earth.

**Sex is Sacred**

Sex is sacred. We seek to keep God at the center of our lives, and to have our sexuality be part of our openness to God and to our community. At its fullest expression, sex has the potential to help us do that, opening us to the kind

of deep transformation that is one of the touchstones of encounters with God. If we are truly responding to that of God in one another, then sexual union can transform us as deeply and as powerfully as encounters with the Divine in worship. Sex involves healing journeys for many of us, and we each acknowledge our own brokenness in various ways. Sexuality also calls for compassion and forgiveness on all our parts.

Of course, not all of us mean the same thing by the word “God.” We are not all Christian, but we do share the experience of deep worship, gathered by a palpable presence of something, a transcendence for which no label is ever quite adequate. “God” is shorthand for that source, however we each may name it or leave it nameless.

We affirm that sexual feelings, longing for intimacy, and sexual identity are all part of our human nature, given to us by God. Further, we affirm that all humans have the right, as adults, to engage in loving and faithful sexual relationships if so led by God, whether as singles, as committed couples, or in a marriage blessed by their faith community.

We affirm that when sexual behavior is faithful to God and faithful to the people with whom we are in relationship, then it is joyful, loving, honest, freely chosen between equals, and is undertaken responsibly.

## **Love**

When Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment, he answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”(Matthew 22:37-40, NIV) The bedrock

of everything we will say here comes back to this: Love God, love each other, and love ourselves (including our bodies).

Different people mean different things by the word “love,” and our understandings of the meaning of love change based on the relationships that we have. Whatever form it takes, love involves a decision to honor the other person, no matter how long or brief the relationship. It involves treating that person as a whole human being and a child of God, not as territory to be explored or conquered, as merely an experience to be learned from, or an object to be acquired. To love means to keep an open heart, to see one’s beloved as they are, to see their newness as they change and grow, and to allow oneself to change and be changed.

## **Honesty**

Honesty is more than just not telling lies. Radical honesty involves opening our eyes as well as our hearts, seeing ourselves as well as those around us without pretense, and showing our true selves. In sexual situations, we are dishonest when we refuse to acknowledge our hearts or our passions. We are dishonest when we pretend to feel what we do not, and equally so when we pretend not to feel. Sex is most dishonest when we lie to ourselves.

Honesty must come first with ourselves, then with our partner, and only then can we speak honestly with our community. Being true to ourselves is part of experiencing Truth, and many of us discover who we are only by connecting with others. This has been especially true in the queer experience and in the experiences of those whose sexuality falls outside the “norm,” but it is a fundamental truth for all of us.

## **Equality, Freedom, and Power**

For sexual acts to be fully loving, they must spring from free choice between the partners engaging in them. Any form of violence or coercion utilized to force or manipulate another person into sexual acts is wrong, since it violates the sacredness of another child of God and that person's body.

Ever since the Quaker movement first began, we have had a testimony of equality. This is not just about kindness or fairness. When people are discounted, we lose the possibility of hearing the ways that God is working through them. When people are told they are worthless or evil, then they can't even ask themselves the question of what God wants of them. In marginalizing others, we deny that of God in them and deny God the opportunity to work in our lives through them. We deny God. Equal rights are usually thought about in terms of religious liberty or employment or participation in politics, but they also relate to sex. Equal rights are also about the right to have God work in the world through our sexuality.

Loving freely and with integrity means being clear about our own boundaries and respecting the boundaries of others. Relationships develop as each person is able to trust the other and open up emotional or physical boundaries to reach new levels of closeness, moving back and forth between protection and vulnerability.

Power differences between men and women affect all intimate relationships between the sexes. Responding to these imbalances—sometimes even seeing them—is not easy, but with deep listening and prayer and a willingness to act as we are led, we seek ways to recognize and counter inequalities in all of our interactions, including our relationships with those we love and touch most intimately.

It seems obvious that good sex has to be freely chosen, but sexual choices can be free only when sex is between equals. No one can truly say yes who is not also free to say no. People in challenging life circumstances will sometimes use sex to gain privilege: that is built into our society, and it is not the same as free choice. When sex is between partners with significant differences in power or status, it is difficult (and maybe impossible) to avoid an element of exploitation in the relationship.

Rape, sexual harassment, and child abuse are obvious evils. Prostitutes and other sex industry workers are sometimes forced or even enslaved. Those are cases in which sex clearly is coerced, but there are also more subtle ways that power dynamics in our society get played out in our sexual lives. Young people face tremendous pressure to engage in sexual behavior as a way of validating self-worth.

Sexual power dynamics are not just in the personal realm; they shape our culture and have done so for thousands of years. Women are held responsible for controlling sexuality. Even when women are clearly being overpowered, they are still often held responsible for setting limits. (“She was asking for it.”) Women are held to blame for many of society’s problems. Rape victims are often blamed for somehow “encouraging” the rapist. Male theologians have routinely blamed women for “tempting” men into sexual sin. Many women experience physical abuse by their physically stronger male partners, but domestic violence and even marital rape are not seen as problems in many societies.

Patriarchy damages men as well. Being “one up” is not getting most men what they really want. Power inequities are a trap, one from which men as well as women find it difficult to extricate ourselves. Men face tremendous pressure to be tough and strong, and this often pushes men

into disrespecting others. Men mistreat women in order to appear strong. Men fight one another in playgrounds and on battlefields because to do otherwise would seem weak. Men lose out on opportunities for tenderness, sensuality, and intimacy because society expects men to be independent and powerful and stoic.

### **Including Everyone**

We seek to recognize and change the ways that our assumptions and our discomfort around sexually disenfranchised groups can cause harm, warping our spiritual lives and narrowing our perspectives and our interactions.

Our working party has abundant lived experience with same-gender relationships, both among our members and with the many loving gays and lesbians that are part of our faith communities. We have seen God's work and God's blessing evident in faithful and committed relationships between people of the same gender, just as in the marriages of opposite-gender couples. The changes in our society that have reduced the enormous prejudice against same-gender love and other sexual minorities could not have happened without the courage of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer persons who were willing to love each other fearlessly, even at great cost. We also owe a great debt to those who gave birth to the civil rights movement for gays and lesbians, including Quakers like Bayard Rustin. People who come out under difficult and dangerous circumstances remind us all—straight, gay, queer, or different in other ways—that our sexuality is precious and is worth fighting for. We are called, with everyone we encounter, to see their full humanity, to seek that of God within one another, and to deal lovingly.

There are other sexual identities beyond just gay, straight, and bisexual. Transgender people (those whose

inner sense of maleness or femaleness does not match with their physical form, or whose gender expression differs from the social norms associated with their birth sex) are increasingly visible both in and out of the Society of Friends. Other groups like intersex individuals (those born with ambiguous genitalia or with physical discrepancies between external and internal genitalia) are beginning to be recognized as well. We are also increasingly recognizing a general identity of “queer,” to include those whose orientations do not fit neatly within any of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender categories.

Oppressed groups have often been denied equal access to sexuality, to child-bearing, and/or to marriage. The sexual feelings and expression of children and young people have often been brutally suppressed by adults. People with disabilities often find their sexuality discounted or ignored, as if being disabled meant they weren't fully adults. Women have often been denied the right to enjoy their own bodies sexually, or to experience the full pleasure of sexual activities with their partners, and female sexuality is often portrayed only in terms of male desire.

Our society constantly promotes the idea that only the young and stereotypically beautiful are sexy. These stereotypes hurt us all, though some more than others. They inhibit the self-esteem and sexual expression of those who do not fit into these limits, including people who are older, heavier, ill, or physically different. It can be challenging for older adults to believe they have the right to loving sexual experience through to the end of life. There are some of us for whom it will be difficult to find loving sexual relationships at all, such as those with disfiguring physical injuries or debilitating mental illness. Even those who fit the “young and beautiful” ideal find

themselves under intense pressure to control their appearance. Eating disorders are epidemic among young women, and there is a whole industry devoted to cosmetic surgery.

We said earlier that sex should aim to be a mutual experience of joy and love, and for us in the working party it is hard to imagine that even under the best of circumstances, encounters within the sex industry would achieve this ideal. The exchange of money also creates a dynamic of inequality between partners, who become client and service worker.

While sex workers are notoriously victims of exploitation and coercion, many women and men choose sex work as a long-term profession or to get through times of financial difficulty. If this is because of economic injustice, this is not really free choice. If we think this isn't healthy sex, then we need to change the economic conditions, not blame it on the workers. When sex workers band together to advocate for themselves, what they demand is for sex work to be recognized as *work* for which prostitutes should receive the same rights and protections as other workers. We remember that Jesus counted sex industry workers among his friends.

## **Integrity**

Faithfulness requires being trustworthy—being clear with each other about what our intentions and commitments are, and then acting with integrity and respect for those commitments. Faithful lovers will not act on their attractions toward other people in any way that violates their commitments, and will not use outside involvements to gain power or control within the relationship. Faithfulness also means not “getting caught up in the heat of the moment,” or having intercourse while under the influence of alcohol, drugs, or other substances

that affect our judgment.

Having sex involves the responsibility to prevent the transmission of disease. Sexually transmitted diseases (STD) are not punishments from God; they are a public health issue, preventable through education. As individuals, preventing STD's is a matter of basic care for ourselves, our sexual partners, and the wider community.

Anyone who learns they have an STD has a responsibility to inform every sex partner they may have infected. There are ways of doing this anonymously. If anonymity will make it easier to be truthful, a health care provider may be able to help arrange it.

## **Community**

To be able to bring our whole selves into our Meetings—including our sexuality and relationships, and all the questions, problems, challenges and joys that come with being a sexual, loving human being—then our Meetings must truly be communities centered around the love of God and our love for each other.

People in our families and faith communities learn from the examples of relationships that they see. When people see courageous partners standing by one another through the most difficult challenges of life, they take hope and come to trust that their own intimate relationships will carry them through hard times. When what they see are examples of untrustworthy, manipulative, or abusive behavior, or of relationships mired in patriarchal power dynamics, it can shake their faith in the possibility of genuine, trustworthy, loving relationships.

We need to feel safe—not comfortable, but safe. True safety involves the capacity to experience pain, to be challenged, to look at the darkness. It has to start with love. As we love each other well within the Meeting

family, we become the ropes that make up the net of God's love that holds us and keeps us safe. In order to love each other well, we must know each other deeply, by taking the time and having the trust to share our spiritual journeys.

True safety also means that all kinds of people, in all conditions of life are accepted, loved, and cared for. Jesus said that his disciples would be known for how they loved one another. (John 13:35) When our meetings are places where we are accepted and cared for, then we can bring to our community our questions, the ways in which we are broken, and the strengths and gifts we have to share—which are often bound up with how we have survived our hurts and healed our wounds.

## ***Loving Our Bodies***

### **Reclaiming the Body**

We see a need to reclaim sexuality from the distortions by the culture around us. Sex is used to sell things. There are people and corporations that profit by exploiting our sexual feelings, often in ways that push us away from connection with each other and make it more difficult for us to stay close to the truth of our own sexuality. There are a thousand ways that sex is sold to us each day or used as packaging for products or to hook us into a treadmill of acquisition and materialism. At times we even treat ourselves as commodities by marketing ourselves, evaluating the value of others on the sexual market, and estimating who is getting a better return on investments in a relationship.

The commoditization of sex encourages addictive feelings in us, and encourages people to turn to commercialized sex and sexualized commerce to feed that addiction. We can resist by grounding ourselves in the

truth and wisdom of our own bodies. We can listen for the promptings of our sexual feelings and emotions with the same kind of openness we bring to listening for God in worship, and then test those promptings in our relationships, in our faith communities, and in prayer. In so doing, we also struggle against the acquisitive and materialistic aspects of our culture, which are among the root causes of wars and environmental destruction.

Sometimes sex itself is what is being sold. John Woolman showed us the example of keeping clear of buying and using products that were produced by slaves or in other ways that caused harm. Prostitution and pornography are often associated with heavy amounts of coercion or even outright slavery. We urge Friends to be aware of this, and to keep clear of viewing or purchasing products that are created through exploitation and coercion.

### **Playfulness and Fantasy**

Playfulness in sexuality allows us to explore our own sexuality from the inside, testing the messages we get from media, family, peers, and religion against the wisdom of our own bodies. Playfulness with our partners also provides a way to act out sexual fantasy safely. Fantasy and role playing can help individuals overcome inward barriers around sex and sexual feelings, especially for those of us whose past experiences or upbringing have made sex difficult. Between two sexual partners, role-playing and fantasy can increase intimacy. In solo sexuality, fantasy can aid in sexual self-awareness and provide an avenue of sexual expression for those who are unable at a given time to share sexual activity with a loved partner.

Sexual fantasies can be problematic, ethically and emotionally, if they are about activities that are dishonest,

exploitative, violent, or involve inappropriate partners. Sexual fantasies can sometimes take on an addictive quality. A fantasy life that is internal can lead us away from a flesh and blood partner or make it difficult to be fully present during lovemaking. Playfulness can also keep us connected. Sharing our fantasies in a spirit of intimacy and fun—keeping our behavior safe and consensual—can deepen our love for ourselves and each other.

## **Shame**

There are many aspects of our sexual lives that may cause us to feel shame, fearing that there is something fundamentally wrong with us.

People feel shame about not fitting into society's gender roles, or about not having a perfect body, or about not being able to perform sexually. Making yourself vulnerable in an intimate relationship and then being ignored or rejected can also raise feelings of shame.

Facing those feelings are part of emotional and spiritual development. If we are not able to face those feelings, they can paralyze us, keep us from facing the truth about ourselves, our experiences, and our behavior, and lead us to hide, to numb ourselves, or to attack others.

We may need help from our partners, families, communities, and ultimately from God to be able to face our feelings and to know in our hearts that we are children of God and that we are loved on the deepest level as we truly are. On a human level, we can disarm our shame by speaking our truth to those closest to us who will listen with compassion and empathy.

On a spiritual level, we need to follow George Fox's call to "stand still in that which is pure; after you see yourselves; and then mercy comes in." Fox calls for us to continue standing still as we see whatever we are addicted

to: “temptations, corruption, uncleanness, etc. then you think you shall never overcome.” But, as he says, the Lord then gives strength and help to overcome, beyond all expectation, and “Then you grow up in peace, and no trouble shall move you.” (Fox, Epistles, Epistle 10)

We are called to keep standing still, as waves of seeing and feeling wash over us. We will see our troubles, temptations, addictions, and we may feel shame. We may also feel guilt—the recognition that we have done harm to others or failed to do the good that we were called to do. But we also feel mercy, and power, and strength to deal with what is revealed to us—the aspects of our behavior that we need to change.

### **Neediness**

Loneliness can drive us to seek out or to hang onto sexual relationships based on neediness rather than on love. Sometimes what we experience as loneliness is actually a hunger for God, and we find ourselves looking for something through interpersonal relationships that is really part of the spiritual journey. Often it is not so much loneliness itself as the fear of loneliness that drives us. Loneliness is part of the human condition, particularly at times of transition in our lives, and each of us dances in a different way between the pain of loneliness and the joy of solitude. Learning that dance, and drawing on our sources of support—spiritual, social, and emotional—to get through times of loneliness is a part of our personal and spiritual development. If we can sit with God in our time of loneliness and ask for help from God, from our faith community, and from our loved ones as we need it, we can travel through the loneliness with faith rather than fear.

### **Physical Closeness and Touch**

Humans need physical affection. Human and other

primate infants that do not receive enough physical affection fail to thrive or even die. Humans continue to benefit from touch throughout their lifespan.

Touch can be healing and comforting. It can help us experience our own wholeness and the goodness of our bodies. In a society where affection is often difficult to get, people often confuse their need for physical closeness and affectionate touch with a need for sex. If more opportunities for getting held and touched non-sexually were available, people would be less desperate to become sexual in contexts where it is not right for them or the person they feel drawn to.

Our society's justifiable fear to protect children from sexual abuse has meant that adults, especially teachers and healthcare providers, are unable to touch or hug children without it being confused with sexual contact. Because it is assumed that women are unlikely to abuse children, there is much more freedom for women to touch children than men. Even fathers and other male relatives are frightened that affectionate touch will be misconstrued. This is damaging both to children and to their male loved ones.

Ironically the only people that it seems safe to touch today are infants and the extremely elderly, because it is assumed that both groups cannot be sexual objects. People of all ages deserve and need touch. We look forward to a time when the confusion between sexual and affectionate touch is decreased to the point where people of all ages can experience more physical closeness with others outside of sexual intimacy.

What is considered "acceptable" displays of affection in public varies enormously by culture, and individuals differ in their levels of comfort with touch. We need to be aware of our own boundaries and respectful of those of

others, whether communicated verbally or nonverbally. Many of us grew up in families where parents rarely showed physical affection towards each other. Children benefit when they see the adults around them comfortable with expressing their love for each other in affectionate, non-sexual ways. We hope that our meetings will over time become places where healthy attitudes towards our bodies are the norm.

### **Nakedness and Dress**

Our bodies are holy, beautiful, and good—*every* part of them. In the story of Eden, shame about nakedness was emblematic of our fall from innocence. In our lives, we learn modesty when we become aware of our sexuality. Rightly or wrongly, nakedness is seen as being about sex. There is power in looking. Men can stare at women in ways that threaten or demean them, and they're often unaware of how much fear they can cause. Women can be equally unaware of how distracting and unsettling their appearance can be when all they want is to be comfortable or to feel pretty (though no one is *ever* to blame for being sexually harassed or assaulted, regardless of what they were wearing). Clothing is a form of nonverbal communication. It is important for each of us to recognize the meaning that our clothing choices have for others and to ask ourselves if we are ready to be accountable for those messages, as we would be for verbal messages.

### **Masturbation**

Masturbation is sometimes called “self love,” and Spirit-led love for oneself and others should *always* be a constant guide. Masturbation is often one of the first ways a person begins to explore his or her own sexuality, frequently as a child or adolescent. Masturbation is healthy and normal for people of any age or life

circumstance. In the past there was a huge amount of shaming and even punishment associated with masturbation, especially in children. The shame around masturbation continues to be passed down from generation to generation and remains present for many people today. Far from being shameful, self-stimulation can enrich one's sex life by providing pleasure, relieving stress, offering healing after sexual trauma, and helping a person tune in to what turns them on—a valuable communication skill for sexual experiences with a partner.

While masturbation is often part of a healthy sex life, it does not come without risks. For some it can be a distraction from shared sexual experience with a partner, blocking communication instead of enhancing it. If masturbation is one's primary pattern of sexual activity, it can be challenging to “switch gears” to partner sexual activity with different patterns of arousal and orgasm. Sexual fantasy may reinforce sexist values and body hatred, and in some cases, it may become a pathway towards addictive sexual behaviors that are damaging to oneself and/or one's partner and make it difficult to be fully present with a partner during lovemaking.

### **Sexual Media (Pornography and Erotica)**

Discussions of explicit sexual media are fraught with confusion. The word “pornography” has no clear definition. It triggers strong negative feelings for some people, with connotations of degradation and exploitation, while for others it's a neutral term for any explicit pictures or stories. Not everyone responds to erotic images, and those who don't (primarily women) sometimes find it hard to understand the power that erotic images can have for others. Further, people who enjoy viewing or reading explicit media tend to do so privately, so stereotypes go unchallenged. The industry that produces sexual media is

also in a state of flux, responding to changes both in our culture and in technology. Given this complex and changing landscape, we call for ongoing discernment on the part of individuals and couples concerning their use of sexually explicit material.

Some kinds of pornography are clearly objectionable. Some of it is made under oppressive working conditions or even outright slavery. Child pornography harms children when it is produced and continues to harm them when it is circulated and viewed. Porn that depicts rape or that celebrates male power over women encourages us to see women as less than fully human. Images of sexualized violence can feed our own violent feelings and urge us to conflate our sexual passions with anger and hate. There is also porn that plays on men's insecurities, goading men into compensating for feelings of inadequacy by bullying our partners. Images like these abound in advertizing and mainstream media as well; a picture doesn't have to be sexually explicit to celebrate and encourage domination or to revel in violence.

Sexually explicit pictures and videos, even when they are lighthearted, egalitarian, and produced under fair working conditions, may still be putting unhealthy ideas in our heads about what sex is and how it works. Our culture is inundated with images of women (and, less often, of men) that paint an unrealistic picture of what our bodies should look like and how they should perform. When the images are sexually explicit—when we use them to arouse ourselves sexually—we are being conditioned to find arousing that which society tells us to find arousing. We may find sexual media to be a poor substitute for real relationships, leaving us lonelier after this arousal than we were before.

On the other hand, explicit pictures, videos, and stories can allow us to explore—safely—our own sexual feelings

and identities. They can help us validate personal sexual preferences and fantasies in a way that then pays off in freer sexual expression with a partner. This can be especially important for people with unusual or “non-normative” sexual preferences, who may have no models in mainstream media or culture. Some couples use sexual media to enrich their sex lives, watching it together and using it for shared fantasy.

One response to degrading and violent pornography is to call for a better alternative. Feminists have been among the strongest critics of pornography, but in recent years some feminist writers and filmmakers have begun calling for “feminist porn” showing sex that is sensual, life affirming, and emotionally believable. Clearly, there is a longing in many people for explicit sexual media that’s not dehumanizing or exploitive.

Children’s exposure to sexually explicit imagery presents a significant concern. Such imagery is ubiquitously available. Almost all children are exposed to it, and changing technology has vastly outstripped things like filtering software. Adults need to deliver accurate, positive, and healthy messages about sexuality to counteract the distorted images and ideas that children will encounter, whether from hard core porn or from the culture generally. As monthly meetings consider sexual ethics, and as they consider the care of families and children, this topic needs to be part of the ongoing conversation.

### **Sexual Addiction**

Our Testimony on Simplicity calls us to make lifestyle choices that open our hearts to hearing and heeding the voice of God in our lives. Addictions serve as one of the most potent possible barriers to this type of openness. Addictions distort our ability to see the truth and can

enslave us to behavioral choices even when we know them to be wrong.

Addictions are not an all or nothing proposition, but rather exist on a continuum of deepening loss of freedom. Advertising plays heavily on our addictive tendencies to seduce us into buying things. Because our sexuality involves potent biological processes as well as deep longings for closeness and love, it is particularly vulnerable to addictive manipulation.

Some of us have experienced in our families the destructive effect of sexual addictions, and have seen it be as powerful and devastating as drugs, alcohol, or gambling. Escaping from such patterns involves, first of all, recognizing the addiction, and then seeking the spiritual, psychological, and physical support required to break free, whether through a twelve-step program or professional treatment.

If I am struggling with sexual addiction but feel too ashamed to face the truth or ask others for help, being confronted by others in my faith community can help me begin a journey towards recovery. Such interventions only work when they are undertaken with respect, courage, and humility.

All of us need to guard ourselves from addictive tendencies in this challenging area of life. True freedom from addiction comes from Grace—the gift of being able to remain faithful to the leadings of Spirit while navigating the mysteries, confusion, and pain of real life.

## ***Relationships Across The Lifespan***

At every stage of life and in every situation we are called to live according to the Light we have, trusting that more will be given when needed. Some of us may have to grow into the ability to love and to open our hearts, and nobody grows up in a single giant step. Healthy, loving

relationships demand a lot of skills, and diving into sex too quickly can put us in situations for which we are ill-prepared. At every stage, even from our first stumbling attempts, all of us are called to be tender and open-hearted with ourselves and also with our partners. Not every sexual relationship will result in a life-long commitment.

It is our experience that at any age, choosing to have a sexual relationship has consequences that we cannot foresee. To have sex is to put one's heart and spirit as well as body into the hands of another. This is not a decision to be made in the heat of the moment, but one that should be made thoughtfully and prayerfully with the help of people whose judgment we trust.

It is often assumed that marriage is the best possible state for all adults, that our experiences as singles are mere preludes to marriage, and that those of us who are no longer married (whether through divorce or widowhood) are somehow less whole as a result. We reject this rigid trajectory of what is best for each of us. In fact each of us is called to discover what Spirit holds for us at each point in our lives.

Abstinence is a choice that some couples and individuals make. Some people will choose to abstain from sexual intercourse during the most fertile part of a woman's cycle. Some will choose to abstain from sexual intercourse altogether. Abstinence requires commitment and self-discipline, but it can allow relationships to develop in a patient and gentle, exploratory way. This can make space for Spirit to move in the relationship. There are also a lot of ways that two people can be sexual together without vaginal intercourse, and those of us who have had this kind of sexual involvement have found that it can lead us to a richer and more nuanced exploration of the sensuality of our bodies.

We also need to recognize that celibacy can be a valid

Spirit-led choice in many situations—for those who are not yet ready for sex, for those healing from emotional wounds and trauma, and for those who choose to focus their lives and energy on other leadings.

### **The Decision to Have Children**

The choice to have children, as well as the one to raise them, are spiritual choices. Partners can choose to have children through vaginal intercourse, adoption, artificial insemination, or taking on the responsibility through fostering. All are all life altering events.

The decision to have sexual intercourse, to use contraceptives, or to end a pregnancy are also deeply spiritual decisions. Birth control is a shared responsibility that involves trust, but each partner can take steps individually. When sex results from shared discernment of two partners, it is possible for these partners to also share fully in responsibility for the results of their actions.

The stability of parents' love for each other is an important part of a child's world. Children crave security and stability, and when children are raised by couples planning (and prepared) to be committed parents, it is of value to everyone: the child, the parents, and their community.

### **Sexuality in Childhood**

Small children feel natural joy, wonder, and curiosity about their bodies, including their sexuality and their erogenous zones. Children are not born thinking their bodies are bad or dirty or that sexual feelings or activities are shameful. Our society is so permeated with confusion, embarrassment, guilt, addictions, and oppressive attitudes about sexuality that it is impossible for children to remain entirely unaffected by the society where they are growing up.

Generations of children have had their natural innocent enjoyment of their own bodies taken away from them by adults. Most tragically this happens when adults take advantage of children sexually. More often it happens because parents project their own wounds and confusion about sexuality, often without words, onto their children. Sadly many children get the message early on that their bodies are not “OK.” Children are also pervasively impacted by the confusing and destructive messages about sex that permeate our culture today and by the tendency to over sexualize girls at young ages.

The best thing that parents can do to help children maintain and/or recover healthy attitudes towards their own bodies is to work on healing our own unhealthy attitudes and experiences around sexuality. Parents can teach children that their bodies are fundamentally good and are temples of the Spirit. Adults can teach them to treat their own bodies with care and deep respect, and lay the groundwork for them to touch others as they grow older with respect and tenderness as children of God. Adults teach best by example—by the genuine comfort we demonstrate around our own bodies and by the affection we show towards those we love.

It is normal for children to enjoy the sexual feelings that come from touching themselves. It is helpful if parents react as neutrally as possible to our young children’s enjoyment of self-touch. Children do need to learn about the importance of privacy and appropriate places and times for self-touch to avoid upsetting others.

### **Child Safety**

Although there is nothing wrong *per se* with sexual play and exploration between age peers, such experiences can be overwhelming, confusing, or even traumatic, especially if a child feels pressured to engage. Parents

need to be aware when peer sexual play occurs and ask their children in a non-judgmental way how they feel about it. Support can then be provided if such experiences are upsetting in any way.

Relationships between children and adults need to be rooted in safety and trust. We believe that all forms of sexual contact between adults and children are deeply harmful both to the children and to the adults involved. Parents and meetings need to be proactive in insuring the safety of the children under their care. [Specific guidelines and recommendations are available from many yearly meetings regarding issues such as Criminal Record Offender Information (CORI) background checks for those working with young people, putting windows in First Day School doors, etc.] Sexual contact between children or teens of quite different developmental ages presents similar serious dangers as those between children and adults.

When there is an allegation of abuse, communication is vital and must be prompt. Parents or guardians, youth workers, event coordinators, and the clerk should all be notified at once. A report must be made to the appropriate state agency within 24 hours. The highest priority at such a time is the safety of the child or victim from continued harm, which means keeping them separate from the alleged perpetrator.

Our meetings and youth programs have a critical role to play in supporting our young people and parents around healthy sexual attitudes, values, and knowledge. We believe that sexual education needs to be firmly rooted in values that spring from a faithful relationship with God in the context of a loving family and faith community. Children get the most from this education when it is actively shared by both parents and the Quaker community.

## **Adolescence**

Adolescence is a critical period of life for discovering who we are, what we believe, and whom we choose to trust and lean on for support during these changes. It is also the first time when many of us experience and explore interpersonal sexual activities. For some, this means discovering what gender(s) we are attracted to sexually or what gender we identify as.

This is a scary and confusing time for many of us. This certainly describes what it was like for us on this working party when we were teens. Adolescents need patience, support, and respect in trying to figure these things out. Supportive experiences with other teens who share Quaker values can help teens make it through this period in good shape. This kind of supportive community of peers helps adolescents learn how to stick to their principles and resist making decisions from peer pressure. It is always wise to refrain from sexual activities until one feels ready.

Young Friends and Young Adult Friends can be rich, deep, safe and supportive communities where members form genuine loving connections and find strength to resist peer pressure, but any gathering of young people has the potential to be a source of sexual peer pressure and may not be fully safe. For adults supervising such gatherings, there can be a difficult balance between the openness, intimacy and trust which rightly accompany shared spiritual work, and the need to maintain boundaries and be aware of the potential for harm.

If parents want to be able to talk to their adolescent child about her or his journey with sexuality or be open with them about what she or he is living or struggling with, they need to start at a much earlier age to build up trusting two-way communication with their child. It is helpful when parents and other adults are honest in

making clear that they do not have all the answers and find these topics challenging and embarrassing (just as adolescents often do). If adults can bring the richness of their whole experience into their families and faith communities—if they can share their stories about the actions they regret and the hurts they have caused or suffered as well as the joys and love they shared—all of us will have a pool of real life stories to draw upon, rather than the fictions and myths fed to us as entertainment.

Most teens get their information about sex from peers, from magazines, and from the internet, and this information may or may not be accurate. Most teens have also seen or used pornography. For many of them, their first exposure to porn was long before they entered high school. Teens receive a lot of messages from the media about what “normal” sexual behaviors are, and a lot of this can be scary, overwhelming, or shame-inducing. These messages may or may not have strongly impacted a teen’s self-concept. It is important for teens to also hear about the positive aspects of sexuality.

Teens need and deserve privacy to explore their fantasies, talk to their friends (in person and online), and to explore self-touch. Youth also need safe spaces to ask questions about sexuality. Adults should be honest when sharing with teens about their own lives. This doesn’t mean that they share everything—rather, it means that adults are extremely thoughtful about the messages that they convey to teens by sharing their experiences (and that they don’t lie). Teens benefit from a diversity of voices in conversations about sexual ethics. This includes a variety of ages, genders, races, theological backgrounds, and sexual orientations. NEYM Young Friends have told us that they benefit especially from concrete examples of what loving relationships can look like for people in a wide variety of life circumstances.

## Sex and Singles

Within our meetings, we have structures to support marriages, and we have been able to adapt and extend those structures to support other kinds of established relationships. Marriage is a respected norm in our society for heterosexuals (and increasingly for homosexuals, too) and single people are often left out, or treated as less than full adults, or subject to a whole range of assumptions about their lives. The social lives of meetings often revolve around couples and traditional two-parent families, further isolating single people—including single parents. Single people need the full support of their meetings as they make choices about their sexual, emotional, and spiritual lives, whether they are single by choice or through the end of a relationship or loss of their partner, and whether they choose to be sexually active or celibate.

Many religious communities and individuals assert that sexual intercourse outside of marriage is always wrong. We do not agree with that view. We believe that responsible, loving sexual intercourse between single people can be faithful to God's will.

Looking for love and sex can be exciting and fun, and it can also be difficult and painful. Part of modern life, with internet matching sites and speed dating, is the encouragement to make snap judgments on a superficial basis. Each of those profiles represents a real, yearning human being. While choices are inevitable, everyone deserves to be treated with tenderness and care. Single people going through this journey can be tremendously vulnerable, or can develop a protective shell to make it easier to ride over the rough patches. Loneliness can be a special challenge of the single life, but sex and love, even in a deep and serious relationship, may not get to the root

cause of loneliness. A loving sexual relationship cannot substitute for a personal relationship with Spirit, the support of family, friends, and the Meeting, or a philosophical understanding of the ways in which we travel through this life alone.

In an established relationship, the people involved build a structure together with shared thoughts, experiences, stories, meanings, and rules about how to be with each other. Single people don't have the security of that structure. There is diversity among single Quakers in terms of what each person wants or needs in any particular relationship, about the meanings and emotions attached to sex, and about expectations regarding closeness, time spent together, openness to the wider community, duration of the relationship, and outcome. In a new or developing relationship, it is not always easy or clear when and how to raise these issues. When they are not discussed, the partners in a relationship may have very different assumptions about what is going on, with great potential for disappointment and hurt. Even when communication has been good, things can change, and that change can be sudden and unexpected. Within one person, there may not be unity between head, heart, body, and spirit, and these differences may be hard to understand, much less communicate to a partner.

### **Choices in Unplanned Pregnancy**

Throughout much of this document, we have been holding up an ideal of faithful sexuality, but life often requires of us that we continue to act faithfully in situations that are not ideal. An unplanned pregnancy presents us with choices to make. For an established couple, it is better to discuss "what if's" before the concern is real and present, and we would encourage couples to continue talking periodically during their

relationship about their ideas about having children and about what they would do if faced with an unintended pregnancy. Raising the child, placing the child for adoption, and terminating the pregnancy are all options. Each of these choices carries risks and opportunities.

How a woman chooses to proceed may depend on her relationship with the man involved. In a loving relationship, both partners hopefully will be able to share the discernment process. One of the questions in that discernment may be the extent to which the man involved is prepared to share in supporting the woman as she goes through pregnancy and in the support and parenting of the child. However, the physical consequences of pregnancy and childbirth will fall on the woman alone, and in our society a father has much more freedom than the mother to escape his responsibilities. Therefore, the woman must be able to make the final decision.

We suggest that this discernment process be Spirit-led. We hope that most Friends facing this choice will engage in prayerful discernment. We would hope that the couple or either individual would feel comfortable asking for a clearness committee for discernment in the matter of an unintended pregnancy. We know that most people in this situation, regardless of which decision they make, will go forward with a new awareness about themselves and others. We are a people of faith, and we can trust that God is working in our midst.

A woman may also become pregnant as a result of rape, incest, or other abuse. Meetings must be prepared to provide immediate and unconditional support to women in these difficult situations, and to provide referrals to appropriate medical, domestic violence, and other services as needed. We also need to be ready to provide support around the tragic unwanted pregnancies that can result from sexual violence and abuse.

Quakers are not in unity on the issue of abortion. Within our working party, we recognize that abortion is the termination of a potential human life, and is not a decision to be made lightly. However, we support the right of every girl and woman to seek a medically induced, legal, affordable, and confidential abortion. Abortion may not be a choice each of us would personally make, but we do not want to see desperate women and girls driven to seek illegal, nonmedical (often expensive) abortions, or to choose suicide.

We do not believe that the ethics of abortion are the same throughout pregnancy. The emotional, ethical, and medical risks of abortion deepen as the pregnancy progresses. If a woman feels in her heart that she does not wish to carry an unplanned pregnancy to term, all of these risks are minimized with ready access to morning after pills and to safe, affordable abortion services.

Abortion should be freely available and rarely used. Key ways that society can insure that this happens is to include sex education in all of our schools that discusses both the emotional and physical dimensions of our sexual behavior, to make free birth control readily available to all, and to provide adequate support services for single parents to raise a child well when this is their choice.

## **Marriage and Committed Relationships**

There are many reasons couples decide to marry—mutual support and companionship, raising children, legal protections, and economic advantages, to name a few—and no two marriages are alike. Friends, young and old, still choose to marry each other as they have done for countless generations, and many gay couples today are asking to be married under the care of their meetings. All of this speaks to the enduring longing for a committed relationship blessed by the faith community. Yet in our

Working Party, talking about why we have married or not married, why we stayed married or ended a marriage, has been some of our most difficult work.

Quakers understand marriage to be more than simply a tidy package of benefits and opportunities for growth that bind two people to one another. *Living With Oneself and Others*, a collection of Friends' previous discernment around marriage and sexuality, says:

“Friends believe that the marriage ceremony is far more than the mere fulfillment of legal or social obligations. It is rather the consummation of a period of searching for God’s will and purpose in two lives and therefore should be entered into joyfully, reverently and soberly.”

(LWOO, p 13)

Those of us who are led to be married under the care of a meeting choose to make our intimate partnership a sacred commitment within a larger spiritual family. We choose to situate our marriage within a community of people who are seeking together to be faithful to God. As George Fox said, “we marry none; it is the Lord's work, and we are but witnesses.” (Fox, Epistles, Epistle 264)

Likewise, the Meeting for Worship for the Purpose of Marriage is also tremendously important for Friends' communities. The couple's joining is silent and invisible, and the words are spoken only in witness to what has already occurred. Many Friends who attend Quaker weddings speak about a palpable presence of Spirit and bonding, not just of the couple, but also of the community to one another.

We affirm that many long-term relationships involve all the love and commitment of a marriage, and meetings and couples can provide mutual support and care even without a formal marriage. Strong, stable, loving relationships are often at the very heart of a strong, loving monthly

meeting. Couples can serve as seeds of community, around which an extended lattice of friendships and relationships can develop. Just as stable, loving couples play an important role in the life of our meeting community, so our meetings play a critical role in nurturing and supporting the couples in the meeting family. Couples can grow in closeness through the things they share with others in the meeting. Meetings can also assist couples in areas that are challenging, and help them heal and grow stronger as a result. Meetings can only help if the couples in the meeting trust others enough to let them know that they are facing difficulties in their relationship.

Certain kinds of intimacy are possible only in long-term relationships. There is a level of spiritual depth and maturation that only comes with deep relationships with others—deep enough to require “sacrifice, patience and mutual consideration” (LWOSO, p 33), and helping us to function as *we* instead of *me*. Partners can share in ways that many of us find impossible in other relationships. Committed relationships force us to work on the nitty-gritty issues of everyday life. At their best, partnerships and marriages can create a mutual willingness to lean on and be leaned on by the other person. The fullness of a relationship can play a key role in helping to fill in and heal gaps left by the brokenness of other relationships, including early childhood experiences. A couple can take on together difficult challenges that neither partner could do alone. Growth is possible when we continue to practice love with one person over many, many years.

All couples need to be clear about the nature of their commitments around finances, sexual boundaries, and children, if they are involved. Without formal written agreements, individuals can be significantly hurt after a death or breakup. Many of the same issues arise after a

breakup of an unmarried relationship as after a divorce. Much of what is said in the following sections on monogamy and divorce applies equally to non-marital committed relationships.

Marriages and long-term, loving relationships are particularly important for children, and

“it is in the home that Friends’ principles first become practices. The home is founded upon love, which reaches farther than words and is understood long before words have meaning. Love is expressed in the respect members have for each other and in confirming the Divine quality, that of God, in every person. Love binds the family together and yet allows freedom for all to develop uniquely.” (LWOO, p. 27)

### **Sex within Couple Relationships**

Sexual activity is an important expression of love between partners. It can strengthen the bonds of love and commitment and be a great source of joy and tenderness. It can also be challenging even for those who love each other very deeply.

Our culture is heavily fixated on the warm flush of romantic love, but physical intimacy may grow difficult between couples over time. Libido will vary greatly between partners for a host of reasons from fatigue to health issues, work and family responsibilities, and emotional issues like anxiety and depression. Past emotional traumas may surface to affect physical intimacy even years after a couple has come together. Living with someone poses many challenges to remaining romantically close, and when the passion of a new relationship fades, people often feel that they have to turn to involvements outside their committed relationship to regain the old spark. Some even question whether it is

normal or healthy to have a high level of physical intimacy between long-term partners.

We feel it is important to remember that good sex looks and feels different over the course of a long-term relationship. Changing sexual needs and desires, along with other challenges around aging, require an honest, ongoing conversation between partners.

Role-playing, fantasy, sexual toys and lubricants, and shared enjoyment of erotic media can be pleasurable for some couples, helping them to ignite sexual interest and pleasure. Others may want to accept that one or both partners have greatly reduced (or even absent) interest in sex. This often creates a sense of failure or shame, but there is nothing shameful about a mutual decision to refrain from sexual activity if this is right for one or both, and a couple that is not actively sexually may still find many different ways to share affection and intimacy.

No one has a right to demand sexual activity from a partner. For sexual acts to be expressions of love, they need to be freely chosen within as well as outside committed couple relationships, but sometimes a partner may choose to engage in sexual activity as a gift for the other even if there is *not* a strong personal draw towards this. Sometimes one partner can lovingly support the other in finding outlets through solo sexual activity, alone or in each other's company. One partner may even decide lovingly to support the other in entering into sexual activity outside of the marriage. We discuss this in more detail in the next section.

Exploring loving and creative ways to support each other through these changes can be painful and scary, and couples must treat each other with enormous tenderness in negotiating these waters. For some, a sex therapist may be very helpful. Listening for the guidance of Spirit around a decision to engage in sexual activity is important within as

well as outside of marriage. All of these alternatives offer couples the opportunity to practice shared discernment as to what Spirit is leading them to do together, hopefully finding ways of strengthening the bonds of love between them.

## **Monogamy**

When one is involved in a committed relationship, faithfulness towards one's partner takes many forms, not just sexual fidelity. Fidelity involves making choices that nurture and strengthen the bonds of love between the couple. Making a marriage flourish over the long haul requires a willingness to let go of many competing loyalties to help one's partner know that she or he is central to one's life and heart. Work, non-sexual friendships, addictions of all kinds, and even engagement in the faith community can undermine the bonds of love between partners as readily as an outside sexual relationship.

It surprised some of us to realize how many people seem to feel the need to try one or another form of "open relationship" at some point in their lives. Several people in our working party have tried it, sometimes with very painful outcomes, believing that we could handle multiple relationships with integrity and learning that we could not. Our group does not have unity on the issue of monogamy. There may be people for whom open relationships work, but we have rarely seen them work and they have not worked well for those of us in this working party.

## **Divorce**

Just as meetings ask couples to test their leading to marry, it can be helpful for meetings to work with couples and with each spouse to reach clearness on whether or not to dissolve a marriage. Marriage and divorce both call for

serious and prayerful consideration of the welfare of everyone in the family and community. By choosing to divorce, the couple releases each other from a promise made not only to the spouse, but also before God and the meeting community. The end of a marriage begun with love, joy, and faith saddens us all. It can also disrupt the lives of children, often in ways that will have effects throughout their lives.

If the couple reaches clearness to release each other and the meeting from their marriage promises, the meeting can help the couple, their children, and the meeting community to make the transition to their new lives. This process can only happen if the meeting is a safe and loving place for its members, providing active nurturance for couples and treating individuals with tenderness. The whole community may find itself shaken by a divorce among its members, and it is common for feelings of grief, anger, and resentment to arise in those who are close to the divorcing couple. It can be hard to stay in a place of loving support at such times, but it is exactly then that tenderness and love are most needed.

We have seen marriages survive difficult times and be transformed. At the same time, the dissolution of a marriage can be the beginning of a process of healing and growth. When a marriage or relationship is abusive, physically or emotionally, then we should not support its continuation.

## **New Relationships and Remarriage**

Those who have lost a partner through death or divorce or the end of a committed relationship vary greatly in their needs to stay in their sadness or to move on to new steps in life. Sometimes individuals are ready to move much more quickly into new relationships than friends or family are for them to do so; other times the reverse is true.

As individuals heal, many will consider dating again. Adults who are used to knowing themselves and having clear roles in their relationships may find themselves facing again much of the questioning and uncertainty that young adults go through as they begin to explore sexually. AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases are issues that a newly single individual may not have had to deal with in years. Basic emotional issues of trust, individuality, or even sexual identity may also arise, and years of lived experience as a married person can leave one unprepared for single life.

When a divorced or widowed person begins to form a new sexual relationship, it is a time of new growth. These new relationships may develop into remarriage or some other form of commitment. Emotional specters from the past—anger, hurt, resentment, loneliness, feelings of failure, and unreal expectations—may arise to haunt new relationships or a remarriage. There is emotional work to be done as each new partner comes to grips with the other's emotional wounds and scars, and is faced with learning new styles of communication in intimate relationships. Seeking help from friends and family, from the meeting community and from the Light of Spirit, can give this new relationship the solid base it needs.

### **Later Life**

Our sexuality does not disappear as we grow old. The need for touching, for physical and emotional contact, exists for humans of all ages. How these needs are expressed sexually later in life may be different from the way they are expressed by younger people. Intercourse may be different or less frequent later in life, but there are many ways besides intercourse to have an active, joyous, and caring sexual life. Becoming comfortable with our sexuality may make the aging process easier. If we have

no quarrel with our bodies and their needs as we mature, we may adjust more easily to changes in our bodies brought about by aging.

Old age often brings with it the loss of a sexual partner, through widowhood or divorce or through one partner's debilitating illness or dementia. Those in later life often face significant financial barriers to marrying. As a result, people later in life may struggle with the traditional standard that sexual activity should only occur within marriage, and some may choose to explore the possibility of sexual intimacy outside of marriage. Communication is essential and, once again, clarity and honesty in speaking and listening are skills that, once learned in youth, serve us well in old age.

Finding new partners and learning new ways to be in relationship can be a frightening journey into unmapped territory, but a supportive community, including the faith community, can be invaluable as we discern new ways of being together and new meanings of relationship, fidelity, sexuality, and love. Also, those of us reentering the world of sexual exploration in old age are entering a very different world from the one we knew in our youth. One consequence of this is that the rate of sexually transmitted diseases is growing more rapidly among the elderly than in any other age group. All of these decisions can be helped by a process of spiritual and emotional discernment discussed in other sections of this document.

Sexual practices, preferences, and appetites may shift with age for a whole host of reasons, both physical and emotional. Some men as they age may face prostate diseases, erectile dysfunction, or changes in hormonal levels. Women may face breast cancer, changed sensitivity of the genitals, dryness of the vagina, and changes in hormonal levels. These and many other shifts can be seen as problems, some of which can be addressed by

medications, surgery, or therapy, but changes with age can also be seen as opportunities to explore new ways of being sexual and ways to increase communication with our sexual partners about our sexual needs and concerns.

Strong connections with friends and family can be of great help. The meeting community can be a great support for its seniors as they face physical and emotional challenges, and it can be enriched by their experience and history. Including elderly Friends in meeting activities may require the same care and creativity as including the very young. The benefits of this go both ways. Multigenerational inclusiveness can give the meeting community a profound sense of wholeness.

We found helpful *Older, Wiser, Sexually Smarter: 30 Sex Ed Lessons for Adults Only*, a book coauthored by Peggy Brick, a Quaker sex educator, which contains an open, humorous, and wide ranging discussion about sex in later life.

## ***The Meeting Community***

### **Care of the Meeting Community**

Friends often find it difficult to trust each other enough to give or receive help. It is particularly difficult to provide nurture and support for each other in such a sensitive area as sexuality. Great tenderness, humility, and care are required. Healthy meetings have a variety of ways for Friends to seek help and to care for one another. The more we open up and talk about these things, the more our communities become safe places to do so. We urge ministry & counsel committees in monthly meetings to stretch beyond their traditional activities, to be proactive about offering clearness committees, and to get issues of sexuality out in the open so that individuals will think to ask for a clearness committee when facing choices about

sexual or relationship issues.

When a Friend is involved in behavior that is doing harm—to self, a partner or spouse, their family, or the meeting community—or is involved in addictive behaviors, meetings need a recognized way for Friends to express their concern to the individual. If this happens, it must be done with great love, tenderness, and humility, and with the guidance and leading of Spirit. While this is difficult work, we need to be prepared to challenge each other to examine our lives in the Light and see if we are living according to God’s will for us.

### **Forgiveness and Healing**

We all need forgiveness. We all hurt people. Often the people we love are the people we hurt the most, because that’s where the stakes are highest. That’s also where we act out many of the patterns buried deepest in our psyches, which are the most difficult to change. There can be misunderstanding, hurt, and suffering on all sides. Many people, including many Friends, have been sexually abused through incest, rape, or in psychological ways. Others have been injured by domestic violence, beatings, and violence in combat, the streets, or other events. These unresolved traumas can result in our operating out of our pain and perpetrating these injuries on others and in personally destructive behaviors, such as overeating, sex addiction, alienation from others, and depression. Guilt, shame, and confusion can leave potent scars, even for those who have not experienced more explicit trauma.

Individuals have their own healing journeys to undertake. Many of us are afraid to talk about sex because we’re afraid that we’ve caused someone pain or that we might find we’re doing something wrong: learning to forgive ourselves is an important part of being able to open up. Jesus said very little about sexual behavior *per*

se, but the theme of forgiveness pervades his entire ministry. If we are willing to be open to each other and to God, and to work through the process, forgiveness and reconciliation can be found.

All of us have a responsibility to listen compassionately to the wounded and to do what we can to protect children and others from sexual victimization. While we seek to treat all parties fairly and to look for truth objectively, there are times when that can result in our *de facto* taking the side of a perpetrator, as when there is ongoing violence or threat of violence. Our meetings seek to remain welcoming to everyone, but there are some situations where all the people involved cannot be in the same room together. Meetings want to be able to fix the brokenness in our midst, but that is not always the path of faithfulness. Some situations cannot be fixed. Our job is not to fix people, but to love each person where they are.

Forgiveness is a process that involves many steps and takes time, moving from denial to a recognition of the truth and finally to reconciliation and justice. We begin by suppressing the pain so we can “go on with life,” but healing involves opening our eyes to the truth. We admit we are powerless over the destructive behaviors caused by our pain and the patterns of protection that get in the way of our living a life of wholeness. Here we ask for the help of Divine grace and other people so that we can go into the pain and sorrow, the punishing self-blame, or the urge to seek revenge. Submitting to grace opens the way for letting go and seeing what our life could be if we released ourselves from acting out the role of victim and/or perpetrator. This is a gift that we give ourselves, but that doesn’t make the process easy, and prayers for peace, healing, and Divine assistance in laying down the burden of suffering can help.

For reconciliation to happen, the person who has been

hurt has to be willing to speak the truth about what happened and what the consequences have been, and the person who caused the hurt has to be willing to listen and acknowledge the harm done, to change, and to offer amends where possible. Reconciliation is not always possible—one person may be dead, or unavailable, or unwilling to go through the process—but healing may still be possible. One path is to strive to see the person who has done harm through God’s eyes, with compassion, as a broken, sinful human being, as we all are. And when you are the person who has hurt someone, you can do the same: see yourself through God’s eyes, with compassion, and ask God how you need to change and make amends. Forgiving ourselves is at least as important as forgiving others, and is often more challenging.

We become ready for healing by asking the perpetrator for an apology, for a change in behavior, and to make amends. If by acting on our hurt we have also become a perpetrator, we need to offer the same justice to those hurt by us. Prudence is part of this process. If offering or asking forgiveness puts ourselves or others in serious danger, we must be aware of the danger and act with that awareness. If our journey of forgiveness is entirely internal, there may be less physical danger, but here we must be cautious that we are not continuing to enable the perpetrator or finding excuses not to go deeply into our own pain.

We often use the phrase, “Forgive and forget.” This is a widespread misunderstanding of forgiveness, suggesting we can erase the harm or sin. But rather forgiveness means that what has happened is not erased, but is open, and people can say their truth about what happened and go on to love each other, accepting that none of us are perfect. False forgiveness—forgiveness as a way of evading the truth—gets in the way of healing the person

harmed, allows the person doing the harm to continue to do so, and damages the integrity of both.

## **Ourselves and Our Community**

To be able to bring our whole selves into our meetings—including our sexuality and relationships, and all the questions, problems, challenges, and joys that come with being a sexual, loving human being—then our meetings must truly be communities centered around the love of God and our love for each other. Sexual decisions, both in and out of marriage, affect many more people than just the partners directly involved. Healthy sexual relationships form part of the latticework for a strong community, and relationships that blow apart can rip communities apart as well.

People in our families and faith communities learn from the examples of relationships that they see. When we see courageous partners standing by one another through the most difficult challenges of life, we take hope and come to trust that our own intimate relationships will carry us through hard times. When what we see are examples of untrustworthy, manipulative, or abusive behavior, or of relationships mired in patriarchal power dynamics, it can shake our faith in the possibility of genuine, trustworthy, loving relationships.

We need to feel safe—not comfortable, but safe. True safety involves the capacity to experience pain, to be challenged, and to look at the darkness. It starts with love. We become the ropes that make up the net of God's love that holds us and keeps us safe. In order to love each other well, we must know each other deeply, by taking the time and having the trust to share our spiritual journeys. True safety also means that all kinds of people, in all conditions of life, are accepted, loved, and cared for. Jesus said that his disciples would be known for how they loved one

another. <sup>(John 13:35)</sup> When our meetings are places where we are accepted and cared for, then we can bring to our community our questions, the ways in which we are broken, and the strengths and gifts we have to share—which are often bound up with how we have survived our hurts and healed our wounds.

“Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand, if there has been any slip or fall; and waiting until the Lord gives sense and repentance, if sense and repentance in any be needed. . . . So, watch your hearts and ways; and, watch one over another, in that which is gentle and tender, and knows it can neither preserve itself, nor help another out of the snare; but, the Lord must be waited upon, to do this in and for us all.” (Penington)

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: NEYM Minute of Commitment, August 2007

**Minute 07–67.** The Ministry & Counsel working group returned to us with a revised Minute of Commitment. Bill How, Clerk of M&C shared comments from gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender, and queer Friends in NEYM who spoke eloquently of their pain. They are not always safe in their Quaker communities. They ask if we can sit in painful places with each other that are still safe. He also reported the strongly expressed desire and belief, on the part of Friends meeting with the working group, that we can find a way to come together. We also heard of our strengths in this YM as a community of Friends working together unconstrained by differences in sexual orientation. Understanding that for some of us, some of the words in the minute are not the way we would write them and taking care to recognize and be tender with the pain on all sides of this issue, we struggled with the deep discomfort some felt with the use of the word homophobia in the revised minute, while others believe that homophobia is among us and must be named. Acknowledging our faith that we have love enough to cover the pain we both inflict and feel, we found unity in the body to approve the following minute:

#### **Minute of Commitment**

We commit ourselves as individuals and as a yearly meeting to work with one another in witnessing God’s movement among us by doing the following:

- Engage in conversation about the deepest meanings of family, marriage and committed relationships and explore what it means to have all of these under the care of meeting.
- Support the work of our M&C working party on Sexuality and Ethics. We need to articulate our sexual

ethics and the spirituality of sex.

- Re-distribute NEYM Minute 2005-55, Connecticut Valley Quarter Minute in Support of Same Gender Marriages, and ask MM to season and test this issue and forward the results to their QMs in preparation for bringing them to YM Sessions in 2008 for discernment.

We commit ourselves to undertake this work in love and forbearance, caring tenderly for one another. We acknowledge that there is great pain in our community felt by the people who are affected at the deepest levels of their identity and relationships by the homophobia that exists within New England Yearly Meeting. We also acknowledge the great pain felt by those for whom this issue has challenged their deepest beliefs about marriage and rightly ordered sexual behavior according to their understanding of God's will. We recognize that these actions ask all of us to re-examine our most deeply held beliefs. It is hard for us to challenge each other. We need our behavior and words to be tender as we explore hard topics. We commit ourselves to undertake this work by educating ourselves, by exploring these issues within our monthly and quarterly meetings and by undertaking intervisitation within NEYM. We seek healing, wholeness and God's blessing as we move forward.

## **Appendix 2: Monthly Meeting and Young Adult Friends' Minutes on Spirituality and Sexual Ethics**

### **Young Adult Friends, NEYM Sessions, August 2009**

#### **Conversational Topics on Sexual Ethics and Spirituality**

- How does your meeting identify and respond to abusive relations?
- I am less serious about sexual relationship than my boyfriend—is this an ethical or spiritual problem?
- Must sex have a spiritual dimension in order to reflect God's will?
- Must sex relations be God's will in order to be ethical?
- How do we recognize and talk about unconventional sexual relationships?
- Do we speak about adultery?
- Does everyone participate in conversations about sexual relationships and spirituality?
- What do Quakers think about sex?
- Are behaviors defined by Quakers as ethical vs. unethical? Is the focus on rules or processes?
- Is sex outside of marriage unethical?
- What do you lose when you “lose your virginity”?
- What does it mean, to the couple and the meeting community, to have a marriage “under the care of the meeting”?
- How do Friends create a safe space for youth, adults, and older adults to raise questions about sex during their stage of life?
- How is sexuality and sexual behavior an expression of human relationship? Of spirituality relationship with God?
- What, if any, is the meeting's role in teaching safe sexual behavior?
- How does a meeting recognize and deal with a sexual predator?
- Might a meeting serve as a “matchmaker”?

- How does a meeting help to build self-esteem in individuals, thereby helping to build strong relationships?
- How does a meeting help support people who have experienced violence?

---

## **Portland Friends Meeting: Sexual Ethics Statement 2010**

After prayerful reflection as a community we are clear about the following:

- Sexuality is a gift from God. We are created as whole beings and sexuality is part of our wholeness from youth through old age.
- We recognize that being sexual is part of being human, and that being responsible with this gift is part of being faithful.
- We are created with desire for intimacy with the divine, ourselves and other humans. This desire for connection is not just about sexuality. It is the quality of the relationship—not the gender or sexual orientation of the partners—that matters.
- Divine assistance is needed and available in any relationship.
- We place a high value on faithful long-term relationships between two people. We acknowledge that pursuing this goal takes much respect and work by people seeking to live a reflective moral life.
- People of all ages should feel unpressured and able to have space in their lives without sexual partnerships.

### **As a community we are committed to:**

- creating and maintaining a place safe in all ways,
- discussing sexuality, worship of the Divine, and life in loving relationship,
- continuing to discuss sexual ethics because it is so

important,

- being tender with one another because sexuality can be difficult and challenging,
- listening deeply to the Divine and others to resolve issues,
- using clearness committees, our conflict resolution process, and our youth religious education guidelines,
- identifying a man and woman to serve as resource people for those with sexual ethics concerns.

They will:

- help us be aware of positive and negative patterns in our community,
- employ formal and informal community resources,
- check in regularly with Ministry and Counsel

### **Sexual Ethics Queries:**

We have used a selection of pertinent Quaker testimonies as a framework to explore and ponder the subject of sexual ethics.

Focusing mostly on the **personal** dimensions:

#### ***Integrity:***

Is my sexual behavior marked by integrity? Do I use reflection and faith in honest examination of my relationships? Do I recognize the power of sexuality and sexual activity? Do I recognize that sexual activity has significance and effects? Am I being honest with myself in my sexual relationship with others? When I chose to share something important with my partner or to withhold something important from my partner do I seek Divine guidance to examine my motives?

#### ***Equality:***

Are my relationships marked by an equal voice for all involved? Are my sexual relationships fully consensual? How do I know that? Do my sexual expressions affirm that of God in my partners? Are all my encounters with sexuality

characterized by equality, not exploitation? Am I aware of power dynamics, active or passive, which are likely to exist in any sexual expression?

***Simplicity:***

Am I mindful that God has called me to simplicity in all walks of my life, including sexuality? Do I refrain from participation in commercialization of sexuality? Do I refrain from supporting sexual expressions whose purposes compromise the testimonies of equality, integrity, community, simplicity, and peace? Am I open to receiving counsel and advice on over-indulgence or addictive behavior? Does my sense of my sexuality add to my sense of wholeness? Am I aware that intimacy with myself can be an important part of a healthy relationship with others?

Focusing mostly on **community** dimensions:

***Community:***

Are avenues for exploring and learning from differences in sexuality kept open? To what extent does our Meeting ignore differences in order to avoid conflict? Am I loving and respectful toward members of my community whose sexuality is different from my own or makes me uncomfortable? Does the Meeting provide a safe space where members/attenders can ask for resources, assistance, and discernment regarding issues of sexuality? Does the Meeting truly welcome people of diverse sexualities and include them in the life of the Meeting?

***Peace:***

Do I work to discover and learn how my own gender, sexuality and presence impact others? Do I seek to bring peace, love and compassion to my interactions with others? How does our Meeting work to oppose sexual violence, to recognize and correct causes of sexual violence within our communities, and to overcome separations and restore wholeness? How does our Meeting work to advance peace between men and women? When a member's conduct or manner of living give cause for concern, does the Meeting respond with care for all involved, seeking to maintain their safety and well-being?

**Mount Toby (Massachusetts), May 12, 2009**

**Response to the NEYM Ministry & Counsel working party on Spirituality and Sexual Ethics**

At Sessions of 2007, New England Yearly Meeting asked monthly meetings to begin a process of discernment “to articulate our sexual ethics and the spirituality of sex.” Requests for guidance around sexual ethics have also come from Young Friends in 1981 and from Young Adult Friends in 2005.

At Mt. Toby, the task of distilling our sexual ethics into one corporate statement has seemed impossible at times. Even a group as politically progressive and open-minded as ours holds a surprising diversity of opinion, and such diversity cannot be reduced to a simple list of points on which we all agree. In the end, with input from older members of the meeting, we realized that regardless of what each of us believes individually, Mt Toby Monthly Meeting has spoken very clearly through our actions as a corporate body. The Quaker principles that inform all aspects of our lives as Friends have been applied to issues around sexuality as they have arisen throughout our meeting’s history.

The discernment process that we have undertaken these last few months actually began 40 years ago, when the meeting grappled with controversies around divorce and remarriage within its close-knit community. In 1976, members participated in writing the pamphlet *Living with Oneself and Others*. Since that time, Mt Toby has chosen to marry same-sex couples under the care of the meeting even though their marriages had no legal status. In solidarity with those same-sex couples, some heterosexual couples within the meeting chose to be married without legal status as well, and our meeting supported them in their choice. The meeting has taken under its care couples who lived together before marriage and has accepted and respected as part of the life of the meeting couples who have never married, and has accepted and cherished members who are straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender. The meeting

has minuted our support of legalizing same-sex marriage, and publishes a statement in each October's newsletter affirming our commitment to the safety of all members.

We can see that, even when members' beliefs seem to be in disagreement, the Quaker testimonies that we share clearly apply to sexual ethics and unite us at the core. Our commitment to peace applies also to the consensuality of sexual relationships, from which we reject the violence of coercion, of falsehood, and of sex with those who cannot give consent. Friends' historical belief in sexual equality means that we expect parties to bear equal responsibility and to have equal power in sexual relationships. We as Friends are always encouraged to be conscious of our effect on the world around us; when making sexual decisions, this includes our effect on our communities, our families, and our children. As Friends, too, we affirm that "Love is the first motion," and our sexual lives should bear witness to our love at least as much as any other aspect of our lives.

We have always explored our faith, not imposing rules to follow but by opening paths by which we may discern our own leadings and go where God leads us, and this applies equally to sexual behavior. While we depend on our community of fellow seekers to be helpers and sounding boards for our explorations and discoveries, what we seek is not consensus, but rather unity with God—with that of God within ourselves and in each other. We recognize that the ongoing process of discernment by each of us and all of us, not obedience to outward moral authority, is the ultimate basis of our faith.



**South Starksboro Monthly Meeting:** First month, 17<sup>th</sup> day, 2009; seasoned and approved at Monthly Meeting, Third Month, 22<sup>nd</sup> day.

Members met to respond to the query that was given to us by the Yearly Meeting Young Friends: “What defines a positive and spiritual sexual relationship?”

**Our thoughts about a positive and spiritual sexual relationship encompass several assumptions:**

1. ‘Sexual relationship’ is different from ‘sexual’ - in that many kinds of interactions can be interpreted as sexual, flirtation for example; but we assume that the Young Friends were asking about a “sexual relationship” where people are physically intimate with each other.
2. Our collective years of evolving personal experience provide some wisdom that we are hoping the Young Friends would like to access. Therefore, we offer our suggestions for what we feel will make the most positive, spiritual, joyful and fulfilling relationships.
3. What defines a positive and spiritual sexual relationship?

First, an analogy: Think of a conversation between two people. It can have a range of styles: dramatic or melodramatic; gentle or humorous; serious; intellectual, or even political. Sexual relationships vary in similar ways. In our culture, there are unspoken rules and contract-like assumptions about conversations. This can also be true about sexual relationships - there are unwritten rights and responsibilities on the part of each person involved. It helps to have thought about or discussed what those expectations might be before entering into a relationship.

**A positive and spiritual sexual relationship ...**

- is one in which we have respect for our own body and that of our partner. We see the body as an instrument of God. As Quakers, we know that there is That of God within each person, so we seek to honor that divinity.
- is fulfilling on all levels, physical, emotional and spiritual.
- is mutual to the parties involved. The relationship has an

equal balance of power - as examples think gifts, favors, labor, and authority.

- is when each person always feels safe and comfortable while making every effort to ensure that the other feels safe and comfortable.
- will feel good both physically and emotionally to those involved. Sex can be joyful.
- can augment your spiritual growth.
- contains an element of love that grows over time; to dissolve into greater and deeper love with yourself, your partner and your experience of the Divine can be considered an ultimate goal.

---

### **Worcester Friends Meeting: A Minute on Sexuality and Sexual Ethics, February 14, 2010**

Sexuality can be a complex area of human behavior in our moral lives, particularly with modern media so full of troubling messages. Sexuality can be a fulfilling expression of the Spirit manifesting love from one human being to another. Our challenge is to infuse our sexuality, the physical blossoming of love, with the truest spirituality of our souls.

Although Friends may disagree on some specific issues relating to personal behavior, the Quaker Testimonies that we share provide guidance on sexual ethics, as they unite us in our worship and ministry.

If we are acting with a concern for integrity, our personal and public behaviors should reflect a consistent, seamless ethic in our interpersonal relationships, so that we are not treating others one way in private and another way elsewhere. Honesty and openness replace falsehood and deception. We believe that an intimate sexual relationship, sharing the best aspects in our partner and ourselves, is more meaningful and uplifting when it integrates the body, mind and spirit at their deepest levels.

Friends' historical belief in gender equality means that we expect parties to bear equal responsibility and to have equal power in appropriately balanced relationships.

Our Testimony on Peace guides us in rejecting violence and coercion, or sex with those who cannot give informed consent. In our public witness, we strive to support individuals and organizations that minister to victims of sexual violence, and promote education and action to prevent violence against women. We also work to halt the use of sexual violence as a weapon in war zones or anywhere else.

As Friends, we remain conscious of our effect on the world around us; including the consequences of our sexual decisions upon our communities, our families and especially our children. In affirming that "Love is the first motion", we also uphold that our sexual ethics should bear witness to this value, as do other aspects of our lives.

---

## **Bennington Friends Meeting Minutes on Spirituality and Sexual Ethics, Approved April 18, 2010**

Having been asked by the Working Party on Spirituality and Sexual Ethics under the New England Yearly Meeting's Ministry and Counsel Committee to discuss and minute the monthly meeting's sense of unity on matters of Quaker values and sexual ethics, what follows are the result of eight weeks of discussion by the Bennington Monthly Meeting between November 2009 and March 2010. Our overarching contextual framework within which these discussions were held was: "How does Quaker testimony regarding that of God in every person inform our sexual ethics?"

\*An asterisk denotes the meetings unity.

### 1. Marriage

\*Marriage is sharing a covenantal relationship between two adults to support each other spiritually, emotionally and financially. Marriage requires faithfulness between two adults

(see section 7.) We affirm the Quaker tradition of equality of both partners in marriage. Sexuality is part of marriage.

## 2. Divorce

\*Just as marriage should be undertaken in all seriousness, with consideration and support from Ministry & Counsel committees, so should divorce follow the same path. It is by following the wisdom that calls us to see that of God in ones self as well as in others that sometimes divorce is necessary to honor that of God in each partner.

## 3. Contraception

\*Contraception allows us to limit the number of children and insure that children who are born have the needed resources for care and well-being. Contraception also frees humans from the biological relation of sex to reproduction, and thus changes the conceptual landscape of sexuality.

## 4. Abortion

On this issue we were not in unity.

Some felt that abortion should be "legal but rare," and should involve both the man and woman's decision. One consideration would be the welfare of an unwanted child.

Others felt that abortion is an act of violence and shouldn't be used as an escape clause from behaving ethically and wisely

## 5. Masturbation

\*Society owes itself to bring this out into the open. Sexual urges are strong and not to be denied, especially in our culture with its sexual saturation. If brought into the open it could dismantle the cultural prejudice and discomforts and prohibitions.

\*Masturbation is natural, and a fairly common exploration of sexual desire, pleasure and function. But any pleasure can become distracting or disproportionate, so that it erodes its positive potential. There is also a place for restraint and self-denial as holding another kind of potential for self-empowerment and understanding.

\*We must try to dismantle the moral thicket, the undergrowth of denial and the cascade of shame and moral judgment. This could reduce guilt in the understanding and experience of our sexuality. But also leaves us open to the fact that we make choices that can entail the deliberate choice to not avail ourselves of all that is available to us. The responsibility comes back to us.

## 6. Sex Outside of Marriage

Ages 12 – 15: In consideration of young people engaging in exploring their sexuality, we encourage open communication between young people and their elders. There is a responsibility within both Quaker families and Quaker meetings to engage in communication with the twelve to fifteen year old group, or possibly younger, to answer honestly from your own experience and to model affection, equality and joy in physical relationships.

Ages 16 – 19: \*When counseling the young the goal is one of self-realization, taking advantage of the full opportunities of fulfillment -to encourage them to look at sexuality from where they are - from their perspectives and not as an adult saying yes or no. They need to know how does one keep other aspects of oneself alive. A better approach to society's mandates are guide lines not focusing on laws and strictures.

\*Free-floating sexuality/raging hormones is most apparent with young teenagers, but [we] seek to connect sex with a relationship developing in all its dimensions, interests, etc.

### Age Independent:

\*We are especially wary of unequal and coercive partnerships and are concerned to empower equally both partners in any sexual decisions.

\*As we discussed the role of sexual relationships between two single individuals, we found the potential of depth and possibility when it is based on love, concern and commitment. It is commitment driven, not desire driven.

\* We felt that casual sexual did not have a meaningful role in ethical sexual relations. We would define casual sex as something that is just for pleasure without care and commitment.

\*Two single adults living together - We find it in keeping with Quaker values for people in seriously committed relationships to live together before marriage. (i.e. engaged couples living together or common law relationships.)

The Elderly:

\*Noting that the fastest growth in sexually transmitted diseases is now among the elderly, we feel a need and concern to address sexuality among the elderly population. Special legal and medical strictures often apply to committed relationships among the elderly, restricting marriage as an option. Examples of special legal and medical strictures include but are not limited to persons with Alzheimer's disease who no longer recognize their partner and persons whose financial well being would be jeopardized by two single households becoming one household. We recognize the need for further exploration but we are not at the point of offering constructive resolutions and possibilities.

Pornography:

\*We do not see a role for any sexual material that debases or dehumanizes people or groups of people. There is a difference between pornography and explicit sexual education material. We are not opposed to nudity or nudity in sexual education, but we are opposed to any thing that debases or dehumanizes people.

7. Faithfulness

\*As Quakers we see faithfulness as honoring, respecting and nurturing your spouse. We also see faithfulness as validating your spouse's journey.

8. Pastoral Care

\*Clearness committees which are formed to oversee marriages and committed relationships that are under the care of the

Meeting are advised that their support of the marriage is an ongoing process, supporting the relationship in the long term.

Note: The emphasis for us is not on what the state regulates or deems legal, but rather on what the extent or care for the couple demonstrates.

## **Appendix 3: Suggestions for Discussion Groups on Spirituality and Sexual Ethics**

By Working Party on Spirituality and Sexual Ethics  
(Excerpted from the letter sent to meetings October 11, 2008)

### **Step-by-Step Suggestions for Monthly Meetings**

Schedule a discussion or series of discussions for Friends to explore issues of spirituality and sexual ethics. Plan the structure of the discussion(s). Meetings or groups may create their own process, queries, and materials, or take suggestions from this appendix. Decide on appropriate parameters around confidentiality and safety. Consider how to create a worshipful space for discernment, such as worship sharing. These discussion groups may include personal sharing, which should be kept confidential, but may also yield corporate discernment as the conversation progresses.

### **Suggested Guidelines for Your Process:**

#### *Safety*

Discernment must be undertaken tenderly and with safety for all participants. There are specific safety concerns for those who have been sexually wounded. On the other hand, the need for confidentiality must be balanced against the need for openness. Some Friends may find the section below titled “Queries on Confidentiality and Openness” helpful.

#### *Discernment*

Discussion of sexual ethics uses the same methods of seeking truth that we bring to other topics:

- Deep listening to that of God within ourselves
- Listening to others as they express what they are called to say
- Learning to love and listen to those who are “impossibly different”
- Thoughtful reference to Quaker testimonies, our inclusive religious traditions, the Bible, and the testimony of our own bodies, hearts, and minds

### *Shared Principles*

If we are to discern what God wants for us as a faith community, we must go beyond our own personal circumstances (gender, sexual orientation, culture, class, race, and ability) to speak to what is universally true about human beings in the eyes of God. Our testimonies can provide guidance for many areas of our sexual ethics and practices.

- God wants us to approach all human beings with love and awe.
- Our bodies are temples of the divine.
- Sexuality can be an expression of our journey towards God.
- Sex is a source of great joy. When there is clarity and grounding, we can experience sexual intimacy with joy.
- As Quakers, we believe that there should be a shared search for God's voice.
- As Quakers, we experience continuing revelation.

As we begin this process of discerning our spirituality and sexual ethics, we need to create a safe space to hear everybody speaking his or her own understanding. As we move forward, we hope and trust that we can move into a Spirit-led process of corporate discernment.

Holding a worshipful space for discernment is vitally important. The sharing done by individuals needs to be grounded in the awareness of the presence of God. It will be good to follow basic guidelines for speaking in meeting, such as pausing between comments and waiting for leadings. Worship sharing provides a structure that may work well.

This work is best undertaken when Friends are waiting upon Spirit, listening deeply and reverently and offering, with humility, stories and experiences. "...what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8, ASV)

Preparation is helpful. Those with minority points of view can be approached individually and invited to join, and it can be

helpful to have one-on-one conversations with those holding strong positions.

**Possible ways to begin:**

- Identify shared principles that can serve as a basis for further discussion
- Utilize queries for reflection
- Invite those who are comfortable to volunteer to tell their stories

**Some Queries and questions for reflection:**

*About corporate discernment:*

- To what extent can or should the meeting be involved in trying to discover what is right and what is wrong about sexual practice?
- Can or should the meeting ever lovingly question the sexual decisions of its members?
- How can or should the meeting be involved in providing sexual values and guidance to young people?

*About sexual ethics:*

- What are the deepest meanings of family, marriage, and committed relationships?
- What does it mean to have all of these under the care of meeting?
- What are our sexual ethics?
- What is the relationship between spirituality and sex?

*About core values:*

- As we consider questions of sexual ethics, what are the underlying values, truths, and experiences from which we draw these ethics? Can we reach unity over these even as we disagree over specific ethical decisions?
- What would a good curriculum on human sexuality from birth to early 20's look like? Based on that curriculum, what would the guidelines for Quaker spirituality and sexual ethics begin to reflect?
- From a personal place, what do I believe?

*Personal queries:*

- If I live in fear, am I living faithfully?
- If I engender fear in others, am I betraying my faith?
- If my need to love is a need to control, to silence, or to punish, am I betraying God's love?
- How are my choices consistent with my sense of the Divine in myself and in all others?
- How does my sexual relationship (or choice of celibacy) support my wholeness as a human being in the eyes of God?
- When I am in the presence of God, am I present with my whole self?

**Some specific ethical topics:**

- patriarchy
- premarital and extramarital sex
- fidelity
- celibacy
- casual sex vs. committed relationships
- homosexuality and heterosexuality
- abstinence, contraception, and abortion
- masturbation
- changes in sexual behavior during the life cycle
- divorce
- sex among teenagers
- sexual interaction between teens and adults
- sexual thoughts vs. sexual acts
- the role of the family, meeting, and society in sex education
- maleness, femaleness, and androgyny
- circumcision
- the availability of marriage and its legal protection
- healing from sexual/physical abuse

**Queries on Confidentiality & Openness**

Both confidentiality and openness are important in the life our meetings, yet there is a potential conflict between them. It seems that these topics are not openly discussed in many meetings. Here are some queries that may encourage discussion and discernment.

- How can we create places of safety within the meeting family where tender emotional and spiritual needs can be met?
- In applying the expectation of confidentiality that is needed to protect us and others from gossiping, do we avoid straying into unnecessary secrecy?
- Is each one of us careful of the reputation of others?
- Do we seek the right balance in every situation between protecting people's vulnerabilities and enabling them to access the love, care, and gifts of others that could help them?
- Are we willing to respect other people's requests for privacy, while being open to inviting them toward greater openness and vulnerability?
- When telling others about meetings or events that we've attended, do we focus on our own story rather than repeating information about others?
- Are we aware of the danger of sub-groups meeting in confidentiality and creating pools of secrecy within meetings or other Quaker gatherings?
- While protecting a tender topic in a small group, are we willing to share more generally or anonymously with the larger group, to be of benefit to those who were not there?
- Are we careful when setting up structures or rules of confidentiality in groups that we not exclude people unnecessarily?
- Are we careful to explain ground rules involving confidentiality and the reasons for them in the announcement of a session?
- Do we hold in our hearts the spirit of openness and vulnerability within the faith community that is so important to being known to each other as well as to God?
- Do we consider that openness both in our meetings and in our lives is an aspect of our testimony of integrity?

- Do we listen to God's voice for the right balance between confidentiality and openness?

*Queries on Confidentiality & Openness* by Doug Armstrong, Susan Baile, Peter Blood-Patterson, Pamela Haines, Paulette Meier, Susan Smith, Eleanor Warnock Gathered in Barnesville, Ohio, on June 28, 2007. Source: [http://www.inwardlight.org/queries\\_on\\_confidentiality\\_openness.html](http://www.inwardlight.org/queries_on_confidentiality_openness.html)

## Appendix 4: Bibliography and Resources for Further Study

Blood-Patterson, Peter. “In the Presence of God and These Our Friends: Embodiment, Sex & Our Life in God.” [http://www.inwardlight.org/in\\_the\\_presence\\_of\\_god\\_these\\_our\\_friends.html](http://www.inwardlight.org/in_the_presence_of_god_these_our_friends.html)

Brick, Peggy; et. al. *Older, Wiser, Sexually Smarter: 30 Sex Ed Lessons for Adults Only*. Morristown, NJ: Planned Parenthood of Greater Northern New Jersey, 2009. (Coauthored by a Quaker sex educator, contains an open, humorous and wide ranging discussion of sex in later life.)

Brown, Benjamin P. “Necessary, Not Evil: Abortion and the Stewardship Testimony,” *Friends Journal*, Feb. 2013, pp. 10-12.

Fox, George, *Epistle 264*, <http://www.hallvworthington.com/Letters/gfsection11a.html>)

Ferder, Fran; John Heagle. *Your Sexual Self: Pathway to Authentic Intimacy*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1992. (Very grounded in the Bible.)

Friends Home Service Committee of London Yearly Meeting. *Towards a Quaker View of Sex*, London: Friends Home Service Committee, 1964. 84 pages. (A ground-breaking booklet that opened the discussion of homosexuality and sexuality among Friends. Can be purchased at <http://www.antiqubook.com/boox/win/411075.shtml>)

Leuze, Robert editor, *Each of Us Inevitable*. New York: Friends for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Concerns, 2003. (Keynote addresses by well-known Friends who offer a collective wisdom on being LGBTQ or an ally.)

Merriwether, Valentine J. “The Sword of Forgiveness: Clinically Integrating Truth, Justice, Prudence, and the Relationship of Love,” *Treating Abuse Today* Vol. 9, No 1, pages 3-19.

NEYM Ministry & Counsel Committee. *Living with Oneself and Others*. (LWOO) Available on line at

<http://neym.org/ministry-counsel/sexual-ethics> or contact the NEYM office.

New England Yearly Meeting (NEYM) *Faith and Practice of New England Yearly Meeting of Friends*. Worcester, MA, 1985. (For sections related to sexuality see especially pages 153-166.)

Penington, Isaac <http://www.qhpress.org/texts/penington/letter20.html>

Wiesner-Hanks, Merry E. *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World*. New York: Routledge, 2000. (On the evolution of Christian concepts of sexuality.)

Versions of the Bible cited:

NIV New International Version

ASV American Standard Version